

THE SWAY OF THE PERSIAN SCEPTRE
The Narrative Characterisation of the Persian Kings in Ezra-
Nehemiah

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This thesis has been composed by me. The work is my own and has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

ABSTRACT

Scholarly study of the biblical book of Ezra-Nehemiah has mainly focused on historical questions. Indeed, the book is one of the most important sources available for shedding light on the history of Persian-period Judea. It has been widely held that Ezra-Nehemiah in its final form reflects a pro-Persian attitude, based on its treatment of the Persian kings within the narrative. The present study seeks to provide a step toward greater precision in this assessment by employing a recognition of the techniques of characterisation used in narrative texts to evaluate the portrayal of the Persian kings in Ezra-Nehemiah.

After a review of the techniques of characterisation and their resulting effects, as identified by narrative critics, a close reading of each of the passages in Ezra-Nehemiah contributing to the characterisation of Persian kings is undertaken in order to discover the picture of the kings that emerges. The book is treated as a literary unity, and the influence of earlier passages on the interpretation of later ones (and in some cases, vice versa) is noted.

It becomes apparent that it is not the implied author's purpose in the narrative to communicate a particular perspective on the Persian kings. Rather, they function as secondary characters, enhancing the perspective the implied author intends to communicate about YHWH. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw further specific conclusions about their characterisation. The Persian kings in Ezra-Nehemiah merge together into a single character, or a single role played by virtually indistinguishable characters. The implied author constructs them as, in significant ways, both similar to and yet distinct from the Assyrian and Babylonian rulers who preceded them. They are assumed to have motivations similar to those of any non-Judean ruler of their general period. They appear to be regularly unhelpful to the Judean exiles, apart from instances of intervention by YHWH on the Judeans' behalf. These characteristics appear to be reflected consistently in all parts of the narrative, not only in isolated sections. Insofar as the narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah may reflect the views of one or more historical individuals, it is questionable whether it reflects a pro-Persian attitude.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS	7
GENERAL INTRODUCTION	8
The Persian Kings	9
Reading EN as a Unity	12
General Method	12
History of Research	16
The Implied Author	17
The Implied Reader	18
Studying the Characterisation of Persian Kings in EN	19
Identification of the Text	21
Relationship to Chronicles	21
Relationship of Ezra to Nehemiah	22
Textual Criticism/1 Esdras	23
Specific Passages Discussed	23
CHAPTER 1: CHARACTERISATION	26
Literary Context	27
The Concept of Character	28
The Identification of Character	31
Narrative Reticence	34
Narrative Discourse	36
Direct Characterisation	37
Indirect Characterisation	40
Speech	40
Actions	44
Scale of Certainty	45
Characterisation and Other Aspects of Narrative	46
Narrative Point of View	46
Implications of Reading as a Sequential Act	50
Further Considerations on the Use of Repetition	51

Degrees of Characterisation.....	53
Group Portrayal.....	55
Continual Complexity and Ambiguity	55
CHAPTER 2: EZRA 1-2.....	57
Ezra 1	57
Verse 1a.....	57
Verse 1b.....	63
Verse 2a.....	67
Verse 2b.....	78
Verse 3.....	85
Verse 4.....	89
Summary.....	92
Verse 5.....	94
Verse 6.....	96
Verse 7.....	97
Verse 8.....	99
Verse 11b.....	100
Cyrus and Pharaoh	100
Summary.....	101
Ezra 2	102
Summary: Ezra 1-2	102
CHAPTER 3: EZRA 3-4.....	104
Ezra 3:7	104
Ezra 4	106
Verses 1-3	106
Verses 4-5	109
Verses 6-23	113
Verse 6.....	114
Verse 7.....	114
Verse 8.....	115
Verses 9-10	115

Verse 12.....	116
Verse 13.....	116
Verse 14.....	117
Verses 15-16	118
Verses 17-19	119
Verses 20-21	121
Verse 22.....	122
Verses 23-24	124
Summary/Conclusion.....	125
CHAPTER 4: EZRA 5.....	127
Verse 1	127
Verse 2	127
Verse 3	129
Verses 4-5.....	130
Verses 6-8.....	131
Verse 9	131
Verses 10-11	132
Verse 12.....	135
Verse 13.....	137
Verse 14.....	139
Verse 15.....	140
Verse 16.....	141
Verse 17.....	142
Summary/Conclusion.....	143
CHAPTER 5: EZRA 6.....	147
Verse 1	147
Verse 2	147
Verses 3-5.....	148
Verse 6	151
Verse 7	152
Verse 8	154

Verse 9	155
Verse 10.....	156
Verse 11.....	157
Verse 12.....	158
Verse 14.....	161
Verses 15-21	164
Verse 22.....	165
Summary/Conclusion.....	171
CHAPTER 6: EZRA 7-8.....	175
Ezra 7	175
Verse 1.....	175
Verse 6.....	175
Verse 7.....	177
Verse 9.....	177
Verse 10.....	178
Verse 11.....	178
Verse 12.....	179
Verse 13.....	180
Verse 14.....	181
Verses 15-16	182
Verse 17.....	183
Verse 18.....	184
Verse 19.....	184
Verse 20.....	184
Verses 21-24	185
Verse 25.....	187
Verse 26.....	188
Verse 27.....	192
Verse 28.....	195
Ezra 8	196
Verse 22.....	196

Verse 25.....	197
Verse 31.....	198
Verse 36.....	198
Summary/Conclusion.....	198
CHAPTER 7: EZRA 9.....	201
Verse 7	201
Verses 8-9.....	203
Summary/Conclusion.....	208
CHAPTER 8: NEHEMIAH 1-6	209
Nehemiah 1.....	209
Verse 3.....	209
Verses 4-6.....	209
Verse 7.....	210
Verse 10.....	211
Verse 11.....	211
Nehemiah 2.....	214
Verse 1.....	214
Verse 2.....	215
Verse 3.....	216
Verse 4.....	219
Verse 5.....	220
Verse 6.....	222
Verse 7.....	222
Verse 8.....	223
Verse 9.....	225
Verse 10.....	225
Verse 18.....	226
Verses 19-20	227
Nehemiah 3-4	228
Nehemiah 5.....	229
Nehemiah 6.....	229

Summary/Conclusion.....	230
CHAPTER 9: NEHEMIAH 9-13	233
Nehemiah 9.....	233
Verses 6-31	234
Verse 32.....	236
Verse 33.....	236
Verse 36.....	237
Verse 37.....	239
Nehemiah 10.....	244
Nehemiah 11.....	245
Nehemiah 12.....	246
Nehemiah 13.....	246
Verse 6.....	246
Verse 18.....	247
Summary/Conclusion.....	247
CONCLUSIONS	249
Overview of Characterisation.....	249
Ezra 1.....	249
Ezra 4.....	251
Ezra 5.....	253
Ezra 6.....	255
Ezra 7.....	256
Ezra 9.....	258
Nehemiah 2.....	259
Nehemiah 9.....	261
Summary of Prominent Themes	263
Wider Implications.....	269
Relationship of the Parts of EN	269
Relationship to Prophetic Literature	271
View of Persian Rule Reflected in the Narrative.....	272
WORKS CITED	275

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ANET</i>	Pritchard, J.B., ed. 1969. <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Princeton: Princeton University Press, 3rd ed.
<i>AP</i>	Cowley, A.E., ed. 1923. <i>Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.</i> Oxford: Clarendon Press.
<i>b.</i>	Babylonian Talmud
BCE	Before Common Era
EN	Ezra-Nehemiah
<i>HALOT</i>	Koehler, L., and W. Baumgartner, et al., eds. 2001. <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Tr. M.E.J. Richardson. 2 Vols. Leiden: E.J. Brill, Study Edition.
HB	Hebrew Bible
MT	Masoretic Text
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
NJPS	<i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NS	New Series
REB	Revised English Bible
<i>Roš Haš.</i>	<i>Roš Haššanah</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	Botterweck, G.J., and H. Ringgren, eds. 1974-. <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a considerable increase in the amount of research in biblical studies devoted to the postexilic community in Judea in the Persian period. One of the challenges researchers face in this area is the unfortunate scarcity of ancient texts available to provide a narrative of events of the period. The biblical book of Ezra-Nehemiah (EN) is one of the few such texts. Accordingly, it has been pressed into service as a source of information on a host of subjects as scholars seek answers to their many questions. The danger, of course, is always that the investigator may try to force an answer from the source when it does not actually provide one. Judicious evaluation is therefore imperative. Inevitably, questions have been raised concerning the way in which the accounts in EN may be used to reconstruct a history of the period. Most scholars now see clearly that the primary function of the narrative is to teach theological truth as the author understood it. Since the writer did not intend simply to provide a 'neutral' record of events, it is possible to err by using the material in the text to draw historical conclusions in an unreflective way (Grabbe 1998: 125).

One approach that holds promise, not only to be fruitful, but also reliable, is to treat the biblical text as a window into the thinking current when it was produced. The ideas the writer was trying to convey are recoverable from what was written, and the written text thus serves as data concerning the intellectual history of the period, apart from modern judgments about its utility as a record of events. Naturally, this involves appreciating the text in a literary way, since it is as a literary text that its message may be perceived. Grabbe, for example, recognises that a literary analysis of EN is necessary as a foundation for discussing historical questions related to it (1998: 123). Such an approach has the advantage of treating the ideology present in the text as an asset rather than a liability.

This is not a completely new idea, of course. Scholars have been attempting to discover elements of the thought of the postexilic community on the basis of EN for many decades. What is at least somewhat new is the distinction drawn between the natures of literary and historical study, and the recognition of the need to pursue

literary criticism in a determined and self-conscious way in order to appreciate the text truly on its own terms. Indeed, as will be described below, the practice of such an approach to EN is still in its earliest stages. Nevertheless, assertions have been made concerning the outlook reflected in EN with respect to a number of topics. One of these is the attitude the postexilic community had toward their Persian overlords.

The Persian Kings

The appearance of several kings of Persia as characters in the narrative of EN has raised questions in the minds of readers for centuries. Throughout the history of interpretation of this book, these questions have tended to be historical, rather than literary, in nature. The Babylonian Talmud (*b. Roš Haš.* 3-4) attempted to clarify the identity of the kings. In Lapide's commentary of 1645, references to the history of the Persian empire from classical sources were brought to bear on this same question for the first time (Williamson 1999: 377). As recently as Böhler's monograph exploring the theme of the holy city in EN and 1 Esdras, this same topic continued to receive significant attention (1997: 132-40).

Interest in establishing the chronological sequence of the kings mentioned in the book is not surprising, since such interest is consistent with the general approach to EN that seems to have dominated the attention of readers. A survey of scholarship in the modern era reveals that the focus has been on attempting to resolve problems related to chronology, or to the origin and nature of the various documents referred to in the book. While these questions are undeniably important, the result has been that rather little attention has been given to the interpretation of the book as a whole (Williamson 1999: 380). The situation could be compared to reading a history of the Second World War, seeking to confirm the dates of the various battles and the veracity of the battle reports on the basis of which the particular history was written, but not stopping to consider the argument the historian is making about the influence those battles had on the course of the war.

With respect to the Persian kings in the book, then, there has been little attempt to discern how they function as characters in the narrative. Indeed, it seems that

many readers feel that this is a question that scarcely needs to be asked; to them the answer appears obvious. A particularly influential work has been the commentary of Rudolph. In it he explicitly affirms a pro-Persian theory of EN (Rudolph 1949: xxiii-xxx). Subsequent readers have tended to take a similar view, at least in general. The following quotes are typical of what one finds in many commentaries and other literature on EN.

To judge from the biblical references, the Persians could have had no more zealous supporters than the Jews (Myers 1965: xxv).

[T]he existing political reality, as it stands, is understood and described as divine benevolence and as God's special blessing upon His people (Japhet 1982: 73).

[The] Persian king is pictured as standing very friendly toward the Israelites in exile (Becking 1999: 262).

The composition must have taken place . . . well within the Persian period, since a favorable attitude is displayed toward the Persians nearly everywhere in the book . . . (Klein 1999: 664-65).

Die Idealisierung des Kyros und mit ihm des Beginns achämenidischer Herrschaft, die das ENB [Esra-Nehemia-Buch] mit einer Reihe anderer Texte teilt, bildet einen ausgezeichneten Rahmen für eine programmatische Darstellung des Anfangs des jüdischen Gemeinwesens und der Elemente seiner politischen struktur (Karrer 2001: 20).

In addition, Gunneweg speaks of the 'positiv beurteilte Vorherrschaft Persiens' (1987: 31).

As these quotes illustrate, it is widely held that EN reflects an attitude toward Persian rule that is positive and favourable. This is usually presented as an inference from the conclusion that the Persian kings are characterised in a positive way in EN. And this logically prior conclusion rests primarily on the observation that in several outstanding instances within the narrative the Persian kings function as facilitators of key events in the post-exilic restoration of the Judean community. Among those who study EN, therefore, it is frequently held that one of the book's fundamental features

is its attempt to represent the Persian kings as favourably disposed toward the Judeans, thus encouraging a pro-Persian stance on the part of its readership.

By way of contrast, however, the results of historical research into the Persian period give one pause. As Dandamaev and Lukonin have noted, based on the wider evidence pertaining to the era there are 'no grounds for speaking of a special benevolence towards Judaism on the part of the Persian kings' (1989: 249). An influential study by Hoglund has suggested that the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah may be understood against the background of Persian concerns to protect against Athenian expansion in the eastern Mediterranean, causing events in the narrative of EN to appear in a quite different light (1992). The weight of historical evidence seems to indicate that the Persians did not show special favour to the Judeans. This tends to imply that the description of the Persian kings arising from EN, while perhaps motivated by an agenda that encouraged support for Persian rule, must have been a construct of the narrator with no basis in fact.

But it is not only that the findings of historical research have called into question whether the portrayal of the Persian kings in EN as commonly interpreted is a historically accurate one. Modifying and even dissenting voices have been raised as to whether the usual interpretation is itself literarily accurate by those focusing primarily on the text of the narrative. Williamson writes in his commentary that 'the books [EN] take a positive stance toward the possibility of faithful life under foreign rule' (1985: 1). This is a perceptible modulation of the view that sees unqualified endorsement of the Persians in EN. McConville has gone so far as to argue that 'the books express deep dissatisfaction with the exiles' situation under Persian rule' (1986: 223). Smith-Christopher writes,

When the Persian period is considered, negative assessments of exilic existence as the 'social setting' for the Daniel tales have been resisted based on a reading of (for example) Ezra 1-6, which is perceived as indicating that the Persians were relatively generous in their return of exiles to their homelands, including the Jews . . . however . . . the constant need to seek permission at every turn in Ezra-Nehemiah creates a rather different picture of relations to the Persian administration. Other recent work on the Persian period reveals that their reputed 'generosity'—this supposed 'enlightened rule'—has been greatly exaggerated (2001: 276-77).

More recently, scholars have begun to notice that the actions of the Persian kings in EN that provide benefit to the Judeans appear somewhat ironic if one appreciates the conditions that were current at the time the events are alleged to have occurred (e.g. Allen 2003a: 16). Historically, then, it seems clear that the Persians were not favourably disposed toward the Judeans, and there is reason to believe that the judgment that the narrator portrays them so may not be as straightforward as many have assumed. In other words, it is worth questioning whether the narrative of EN really does render the Persian kings as favourably disposed toward the Judeans.

The appropriate procedure, it would seem, is to attempt a fresh examination of the issue in terms of the narrative. Exactly how *does* the narrator of EN portray the Persian kings? What, if anything, can be concluded from this about the narrator's attitude toward Persian rule? This is fundamentally a literary matter. It requires dealing with the text in a literary fashion, seeking to understand the message it conveys. It requires use of the tools of narrative criticism, recognising the implications of the various ways the narrator expresses himself and arranges his material. It requires appreciation of how characters are treated by narrators. It requires a careful examination of all of the passages in EN that contribute to the characterisation of the Persian kings and an attempt to synthesise the findings. It is only after such an exploration has been carried out that one may be in a position to make assertions about the portrayal of the Persian kings in EN with any confidence. No specific investigation of this topic has previously been undertaken. This is what the present study purposes to do.

Reading EN as a Unity

General Method

In one sense, the method employed in this study has already been explained much more thoroughly elsewhere than can be done here. In general, it may be described as narrative criticism of the type associated with the names of Alter (1981), Bar-Efrat (1989), Berlin (1983), and Sternberg (1985). This approach is concerned to make sense out of a narrative as a work of art, paying attention to the flow and structure of the story.

[Narrative critics] assume, for instance, that the narrative is to be read sequentially and completely with all of its parts being related to the work as a whole . . . Readers may also be assumed to desire consistency and to make connections necessary to resolve apparent tensions within a text in favor of the most consistent interpretation (Powell 1999: 203).

By this method, a narrative is read as an intentional and finished product with a discernible coherence. Questions concerning the text's correspondence to actual historical events and the process by which the text was composed (diachronic development) are initially set aside in order to concentrate on the text's meaning.

Since the actual author (or authors) of EN is unknown, such a narrative is interpreted with reference to what is called the 'implied author'.¹ This term is used to refer to 'the perspective from which the work appears to have been written, a perspective that must be reconstructed by readers on the basis of what they find in the narrative' (Powell 1999: 202). Corresponding to the implied author is the 'implied reader'. As the implied author is reconstructed from the text, so, too, is the implied reader. The implied reader 'respond[s] to texts in ways consistent with the expectations ascribed to their implied authors' (Powell 1999: 202). In other words, the implied reader understands what the implied author is trying to say.

The concepts of implied author and reader make it necessary to revisit the question of the relevance of historical background to narrative critical reading. While it is true that literary criticism can be practised in overly narrow ways that produce flawed results (Barton 1987), it is not necessary that a literary emphasis completely ignore historical considerations. As confirmed a literary critic as Sternberg maintains that '. . . the more complete and reliable our knowledge of the world from which the Bible sprang, the sharper our insight into its working and meaning as text . . .' (1985: 16). This is a somewhat different posture from that of New Criticism or Formalism (Surin 1987: 114), with which Sternberg and other literary critics have much in common and are frequently identified (Mintz 1984: 229). Formalism maintains that the historical setting of a piece of literature is

¹ The concept seems to have been first developed by Booth (1961: 71-76, 211-21).

virtually irrelevant to its interpretation. Sternberg, however, acknowledges that historical background information can be useful in attempting to understand the author's intended communication.

Included in what Sternberg has in mind is that the use of language and various literary conventions present in the text corresponds to the use of these features at a particular place and time in history. The better acquainted the modern reader is with the use of these features, the better the chance that the expected effect of the text will be realised. But it is not only acquaintance with linguistic features that the implied reader is expected to bring to the text. Powell notes that '[a] normative process of reading also assumes that readers know certain things' and that 'narrative criticism interprets stories from the perspective of readers who accept the beliefs and values that undergird those stories' (1999: 203). The 'beliefs and values' undergirding a story surely include ideology. The comment of Merenlahti and Hakola, although made in the context of New Testament gospel study, is pertinent to all ancient narratives, especially those presented to the reader as non-fictional: 'forms of narrative analysis that are more open to questions concerning the ideological and historical background of the texts must be considered preferable, because they pay due attention to the nature of the Gospels as non-fictional narratives' (1999: 48). When a narrative purports to deal with a historical subject, the connotations attached to the subject matter by implied author and reader form important elements of the interpretive framework.

In terms of the present discussion, it may be said that the implied reader is aware of all the background that the implied author expects him to be aware of, and shares the evaluations of events and characters in the narrative that the implied author takes for granted. Thus, as part of a narrative critical reading of an ancient text, it becomes necessary to understand what the implications of particular features of the text would have been to readers at the time it was written. Although this involves consideration of historical data, it is very different from what is usually meant by historical criticism. The text is read synchronically, not diachronically. The text need be dated in only the most general way. The focus is still on the literary

effect of the text, but it is recognised that the implied reader, in the case of EN, is an ancient Judean, not a modern citizen of the West.

To illustrate the way that background assumptions become part of the inherent meaning of a story, an example may be useful. Consider the movie *Big*. The plot centres on a 12-year old boy named Josh. At the beginning of the movie, Josh is at a fair. He is too small to go on the adult rides and too small to impress the girl on whom he has a crush. Despondent, Josh turns to an amusement machine called Zoltar, with a robotic genie in a booth. Although Josh does not really think the machine can do anything for him, he inserts his money and declares that he wishes that he were 'big'. A card pops out of the machine, telling him that his wish is granted. The next morning, when Josh wakes up, he has the body of a full-grown adult. This turn of events has to be considered ironic. Yet in order to truly appreciate the irony, the audience has to be familiar with the nature of amusements one typically finds at a fair. It would be a misunderstanding of the story to suppose that the intent was to show that it is possible to build a machine that grants wishes. It is precisely because amusements at fairs often promise much more than they can deliver that Josh (and the audience of the movie) is so surprised when he actually has become 'big'. If the viewer was completely unfamiliar with amusements at fairs, there may be some uncertainty about how to understand what transpired in this event. But the culturally informed viewer is completely clear that something that should have had *no* effect was *very* effective. To interpret it in any other way is to misinterpret what took place. And this is true even though it is not explained to the viewer in the movie. In the same way, it is important in a literary reading of an ancient text to attempt as far as possible to bring the same assumptions to the text that the ancient implied reader would bring. This involves ascribing the same meaning and significance to narrated events, even if that significance is not formally explained in the text.

The approach taken in this study easily distinguishes it from others, such as that of Bedford (2001). In that study, the purpose is to determine what actually took place historically in connection with the construction of the temple in Jerusalem during the Achaemenid period. In addition, Bedford uses biblical texts in an attempt

to arrive at an understanding of the ideologies current at the time that supported the construction effort. Although he gives careful attention to biblical texts, his ultimate interest is in the world outside of the text. Thus, his study belongs primarily to the realm of historical criticism. The present study, by contrast, seeks to use historical information from outside the biblical text that bears on literary conventions in order to better understand the biblical text itself.²

History of Research

The history of the narrative critical study of EN is rather brief. The seminal work in this area is the monograph of Eskenazi (1988a). This was the first attempt to apply the discipline of narrative criticism to EN. But even apart from strict adherence to any methodology identified with the newer forms of literary criticism, attempts to explicate the meaning of EN as a unified narrative have been few and far between. Childs gives such an account in his introduction to the Old Testament (1979), and Gunneweg has adopted this approach in his work (1981; 1985; 1987). Here also may be noted the essays by Shaver (1992) and Japhet (1994), and the contributions of Talmon (1987) and Green (1993) to volumes on the literary reading of biblical texts. In his commentary, Williamson attempts to give an account of the meaning that emerges when the narrative is read synchronically in the section of his introduction entitled 'A Theological Reading' (1985: xlviii-lix). Some recent commentaries are also more intentional in interpreting the text as a unity, such as Throntveit (1992), Grabbe (1998: 9-68, 94-102) and Allen (2003a; 2003b). The most important attempt to read EN using the discipline of narrative criticism since Eskenazi is the work of Duggan (2001). He provides an analysis of the so-called covenant renewal passage (Neh. 7:72b-10:40) and relates it to the literary and theological context of EN as a whole. Thus, the history of synchronic study of EN is limited, and the history of specifically narrative critical study of it more limited still. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity to break new ground.

² Specific application of narrative criticism to the topic of characterisation will be discussed in greater detail below.

The Implied Author

The history of the composition of EN, has, of course, been a topic of great interest to scholars.³ Indeed, it is not hard to see why this question should attract so much attention. On the one hand, a work like the Pentateuch, for example, although in its present form ostensibly a unified composition, has been the subject of a great deal of debate concerning the possible documents from which it may have been composed. EN, on the other hand, *claims* to incorporate numerous documents, some of significant length. This naturally invites investigation of the origin and nature of the purported documents.

But there is the further question of how such a narrative functions as a unity, or how it may be read synchronically. Japhet points out that the literary method of EN is unique in the HB. She divides the documents it contains into two types, official and literary, and says that 'the official documents are supplied with a narrative framework and the literary ones are left to transmit their own story'. She notes that peculiar features of each document are preserved, such as being written in Hebrew or Aramaic, and believes that the author has altered them very little. The author is seen to be most observable in the book's 'general structure, its specific periodisation, some harmonistic remarks and the material he added to his sources'. As a result, there is more than one voice speaking in the narrative, sometimes simultaneously. She concludes that 'it is only through the understanding of this method that the various aspects of Ezra-Nehemiah become clear, and that the distinctive historical view taken by the author of Ezra-Nehemiah can be grasped' (Japhet 2000: 148-49). Elsewhere, she writes that

although, on the one hand, the author of the book chose to use existing literary sources and did not include much of his own writing, nevertheless, on the other hand, he sought to express his own views by placing this borrowed material within a chronological and historical framework that he himself created (Japhet 1994: 215).

³ Useful discussions of the history of scholarship on this issue may be found in Williamson (1999) and Klein (1992: 733-35).

The special challenge presented by EN is to recognise how the author makes use of the other material with its attendant voices to achieve his own purposes. 'It is crucial, in interpreting any book, to ascertain which perspective among competing visions actually reflects the book's own point of view' (Eskenazi 1988a: 132). This is the view 'according to which the events of the narrative are evaluated or judged' (Berlin 1983: 55).

Japhet takes the stance that the book may be explained 'as a book that was produced 'all at once', by an author, according to a clear plan' (1994: 200-01). There are many, of course, who would dispute whether in fact the book was produced in this way. What is important for this study is that the book *may* be read as though written by a single author. It is doubtful, in fact, whether ancient readers sought to reconstruct various stages of composition as modern scholars often do. Thus, whoever was responsible for the present form of the book likely anticipated that those reading it would read it as the composition of a single author, distinguishing an authoritative authorial voice undergirding the whole. The 'author' who is detected when the book is read in this way is the implied author. The aim in this study is to become aware of the way in which this implied author has characterised the Persian kings, for this is the portrayal that is most relevant to the question of the attitude toward Persian rule reflected in the narrative.

The Implied Reader

As mentioned above, the implied reader of a text may also be established from the text itself. The implied reader understands everything the implied author attempts to communicate in the text.⁴ The implied author and implied reader, therefore, largely share the same assumptions and values. It is important for modern readers to be aware of how their own assumptions and values may differ from those

⁴ The only exception would be if the implied author intended to be obscure, at which point the implied reader would understand this intention.

of the implied reader if we are to see clearly how an ancient text was expected to affect its implied reader (Powell 1999: 203).

On the characteristics of the implied reader of EN, the remarks of van Wyk are very relevant. Although his focus is on Ezra 1-6, his observations appear to apply to the whole book:

The intended readership of Ezra 1-6 was undoubtedly Jewish – in terms of ethnicity *and* religion. This is evident in the first place from the use of the Hebrew language for most of the text and especially the narrative frame of Ezra 1-6. The use of Aramaic elsewhere reflects the wider socio-political reality of the intended readers. It is suggested, in the second place, by the centrality of the Jews to the narrative, with the leaders as well as otherwise irrelevant individuals being laboriously named and listed. And finally it is confirmed by the strong focus on the Jewish religion and customs, for example, by the role of YHWH the God of Israel in the events, as well as the importance of various Jewish religious officials and religious ceremonies. All of this was clearly already relevant to the text's intended readership; there is no effort to motivate its inclusion or relevance to a disinterested audience.

In essence it means that Ezra 1-6 was not intended for a wide-ranging universal readership, but for a limited readership defined by specific ethnic, political and religious allegiances. In other words, Ezra 1-6 was not intended to convert people from the broad community to accept the Jewish political and religious values; it was meant to confirm the religious beliefs and legitimate the political claims of the Jews, to those inside the community (1996: 46-47).

In seeking to determine the characterisation of the Persian kings in EN, it is crucial to attempt to evaluate the data in the text as it would have been perceived by the type of reader van Wyk has described. Where such readers differ from modern readers, modern tendencies must be set aside.

Studying the Characterisation of Persian Kings in EN

Although the topic of the characterisation of the Persian kings in EN has not previously received sustained attention in scholarly study, it is worthwhile to mention some of the opinions that have been stated relative to it. The major conclusion, referred to above, is that the Persian rulers are portrayed as benevolent to the returning Judeans and supportive of their efforts at restoration. This is based on the several references in the book to actions taken by the kings that facilitate reconstruction of the temple at Jerusalem, the reinstitution of the Mosaic law in

Yehud, and the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem. All are agreed that the Persian kings are represented as divine instruments.⁵ This is usually taken to imply that the writer (or writers, in the case of diachronic study) of EN has a favourable opinion of Persian rule.

It should be noted, however, that most scholars are aware that such a portrayal cannot be held to be uniform. Ezra 9 and, especially, Nehemiah 9 are seen as passages in which Persian rule is held in considerably lower esteem. In these two texts, subjection to Persian power is depicted as slavery (Ezra 9:9; Neh. 9:36). The usual way of explaining such a different perspective is to attribute the prayers of Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 to original authors different from that or those who composed the other passages referring to Persian kings. In a synchronic reading of EN, however, it becomes necessary to appreciate the perspective of such passages in a different way. In line with Japhet's approach described above, the goal is to discover how the implied author has arranged the various voices that speak in the text, and possibly adjudicated among them, so as to communicate his intended message.

Although Eskenazi does not focus on the portrayal of the Persian kings, her study of EN does address the subject to some extent. One of the aspects that contributes significantly to her overall reading of the narrative is the observation that in Ezra 6:14 the epithet 'king of Persia' appears to be used once to apply to three kings, Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, as though they comprised a single unit. Similarly the decree (דָּרֹשׁ) of the kings is also referred to in the singular as though there were only one (Eskenazi 1988a: 60 *et passim*). Eskenazi suggests that the kings are depicted as though 'they spoke with one voice' (1988a: 60). In light of her proposal, it is important to consider how far the Persian kings are differentiated as characters in EN or to what extent they function more like a single character.

The brief and unsystematic treatment of this topic in the secondary literature, then, suggests two conflicting perspectives. From one side, most scholars see a preponderance of evidence for an affirming portrayal of Persian rule in EN, and

⁵ Cf. Duggan, who understands this to be a thematic device providing a parallel between Ezra 1-6 and Ezra 7-Nehemiah 13 (2001: 62).

Eskenazi has raised awareness of the possibility that the kings are seen as virtually a single character in the narrative. These argue for a homogeneous presentation. From the other side, Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 are thought by many to be out of step with the rest of the narrative, arguing for a disharmonious presentation. Williamson, for one, seems to recognise that there is a tension present, whereby the implied author accepts the possibility that the Judean community may live faithfully under foreign rule while at the same time looking for independence (1985: 1-1ii). Others, such as Japhet, maintain that there is an unmistakably prevailing view, the effect of which is not substantially diminished by the two prayers.⁶ A narrative critical reading of EN must endeavour to explain how all of these features work to achieve the implied author's expected effect on the implied reader. A greater degree of precision and clarity on this matter is a desideratum.

Identification of the Text

As always with careful study of a biblical text, it is imperative to make specific decisions about just what is the object of study. In the case of a narrative reading of EN, there are three important issues with which to deal: whether to read EN as the conclusion of Chronicles, whether to read EN as a unity, and how to handle matters of textual criticism, including the problem of 1 Esdras.

Relationship to Chronicles

The question of the relationship of EN to a supposed Chronistic history remains unresolved. The parameters of the discussion were framed by the influential work of Zunz (1832: 12-34) and Movers (1834), who argued that Chronicles and EN originally were one book. The subsequent history of research on this question may be traced in such works as Noth (1943: 110-216), Gunneweg (1985: 24-26) and Blenkinsopp (1988: 47-54), all of whom argue for a 'Chronicler's history'. The view that Chronicles and EN are separate compositions may be found in Japhet (1968; 1991a), Williamson (1977: 1-70) and Eskenazi (1988a: 14-36). Selman (2005) gives

⁶ See the quote above, p. 10.

a particularly helpful summary of the debate over the years and concludes in favour of treating Chronicles and EN separately. There is no manuscript or other external evidence for the unity of the two. Among those who have sought to establish the nature of the relationship between the two on the basis of linguistic evidence is Throntveit. His conclusion seems well-advised:

While I am among those who doubt the common authorship of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, I do not think linguistic analysis is capable of providing definite proof either way. Perhaps the safest course would be to take seriously the *a priori* assumption of separate authorship and investigate both works individually from a theological point of view, leaving the question of authorship open until the intent and message of both are better understood (1982: 215).

In this study, then, EN will be read as a discrete text, not as the conclusion of Chronicles.

Relationship of Ezra to Nehemiah

The question has also been raised, however, not only of whether EN should be kept separate from Chronicles, but of whether Ezra and Nehemiah should be kept separate from each other. Naturally, those referred to above as offering a unitary reading of EN may be consulted for reasons why the text should be read in that way.⁷ The most forthright arguments for reading Ezra and Nehemiah as separate compositions may be found in VanderKam (1992) and Kraemer (1993). Once again, the evidence of the history of EN is important. There is no record of their existence as separate entities prior to the time of Origen (Swete 1900: 197-230). To this may be added observations such as those of Karrer: the teaching and explanation of the Torah, the connection between Neh. 1:1 and Ezra 7:1, 7 with the seventh month, and the foreshadowing of Nehemiah's wall-building in Ezra 4 are all overlapping themes between Ezra and Nehemiah that speak for their unity (2001: 60-61). There is ample basis for reading EN as a unity.

⁷ See p.16.

Textual Criticism/1 Esdras

This study concerns EN in the HB, and, accordingly, reads the Masoretic Text (MT). This is the text used for the majority of discussion about EN, and is therefore the most relevant for scholarly engagement. Most scholars are of the opinion that the Hebrew and Aramaic text of EN seems to have been well transmitted and is relatively free of problematic readings (e.g. Blenkinsopp 1988: 70). It is unnecessary to determine a precise date for the composition of EN. As will be seen in the course of the study, it is sufficient to find in the text an implied reader from the period extending from the late fifth to late fourth or even early third century BCE. Most commentators are satisfied to date EN within this range. There are no serious text-critical issues impinging on the passages examined in this study.

The relation of EN to 1 Esdras is an issue that has elicited some rather complicated argumentation. A recent extensive treatment of the question may be found in Böhler (1997), who argues that EN is a later recension of 1 Esdras, remodeled to include the account of Nehemiah. The contrary view has most notably been argued in recent years by Talshir (1999),⁸ who also responded specifically to Böhler's work in a shorter article (Talshir 2000). She maintains that 1 Esdras was modified from EN to its extant form in order to include the tale of the three youths. It seems that the majority of scholars maintain the priority of EN. Once again, it is this text that is the focus of study here.

Specific Passages Discussed

A narrative critical reading, as explained above, strives to make sense of a text as a unity. Necessarily, then, the present study requires a reading of the entire book of EN. It is also the case, however, that the Persian kings are only referred to in portions of the book. For this reason, only those specific passages deemed most significant for the characterisation of the Persian kings in EN will be discussed here. The wider context of the book will be presumed and drawn into the discussion as relevant.

⁸ Completed as a dissertation in 1984 in Hebrew.

The Persian kings are most directly involved in the narrative in Ezra 1-7 and Nehemiah 2. Outside of these texts they play a more peripheral role. The most important passages for the present study are these:

Ezra 1:1-8 – The edict of Cyrus and its immediate aftermath

Ezra 3:7 – A reference to the authorisation the returned exiles had received from Cyrus

Ezra 4:1-24 – The opposition encountered by the returned exiles, including an example of their interference with reconstruction in the time of Artaxerxes

Ezra 5:1-17 – The renewal of temple construction and the official enquiry into its legitimacy in the time of Darius

Ezra 6:1-15, 22 – The confirmation of the legitimacy of the reconstruction by Darius and a concluding retrospective on events to this point

Ezra 7:1-28 – The introduction of Ezra and the letter from Artaxerxes outlining his commission and provisions for the Jerusalem temple

Ezra 8:22 – Ezra's explanation of his reluctance to request military protection from the king

Ezra 9:6-9 – A portion of Ezra's prayer of confession

Nehemiah 1:1-2:10, 18-20 – Nehemiah's encounter with Artaxerxes and his initial encounters with the returned exiles in Jerusalem and their enemies

Nehemiah 5:4 – A reference to the king's tax

Nehemiah 6:7-8 – Sanballat's threat to accuse Nehemiah of rebellion before the king and Nehemiah's response

Nehemiah 6:15 – Nehemiah's account of the perceptions of the surrounding peoples at the completion of the wall of Jerusalem

Nehemiah 9:6-37 – The Levites' prayer of confession

Nehemiah 11:24 – A reference to a Judean with an official position

Nehemiah 12:44-47 – The provision of food for temple personnel

Nehemiah 13:6 – Nehemiah's explanation of his absence from Jerusalem

Nehemiah 13:18 – Nehemiah's rebuke of the Judean nobles

Before beginning the discussion of these passages, it will be helpful to give consideration to the specific methods by which characterisation is achieved and, therefore, detected in narrative. This is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 1: CHARACTERISATION

The aim of this study is to use an awareness of recognised literary techniques to observe how the text guides the reader in the process of forming a conception of the characters of the Persian kings in EN. In order to achieve this aim it is necessary to survey the literary techniques that scholars have identified in connection with characterisation and understand how the data are used to formulate conclusions. As part of this review, the present study will be located with respect to some of the major questions of approach and method within the context of biblical criticism.

A meaningful description of the 'portrayal' of the Persian kings in EN presumes that their depiction in the text is the result of an intentional process by its author. That is, the author selectively shaped his discourse in order to achieve a particular representation of his subject matter, including the major and minor characters in the narrative. It need not be presupposed, of course, that the same degree of characterisation has been achieved or attempted with all the characters in a given story. It is natural to expect that those who are more central and about whom more information is given have received a greater share of the author's attention in the compositional process. Equally, however, it is reasonable to believe that such aspects of character as do arise from the narrative in connection with less central participants are not accidental, but part of the overall understanding which the writer intended to impart. These considerations are founded on the more basic postulate that the author wished to communicate certain ideas, and that these ideas can be understood from the text.⁹

To proceed from this starting-point, it is necessary to identify the conventions which the author of EN has employed in the process of embodying his intended communication. A significant number of studies have addressed the issue of literary conventions, with respect to both biblical and non-biblical literature. Many

⁹ The role of the text as mediator of the authorial message is a vital component of the position taken by Sternberg (1985: 9) and Vanhoozer (1998: 34-35).

conventions and techniques used by HB authors have been isolated and discussed, particularly in the past 30 years. The following survey will focus primarily on biblical studies, paying special attention to the techniques that have been identified whereby biblical authors have achieved characterisation in narrative. It is an awareness of these techniques that will be applied to the text of EN in order to arrive at an evidentially supported statement of the nature of the portrayal of the Persian kings in the book.

Literary Context

One general matter that should be addressed is the relationship between EN and the other narratives in the HB. At issue is the question of whether observations about literary conventions which appear to be operative in those other narratives (particularly those in Genesis – 2 Kings) may or should be applied to EN. Much of what has been written on literary criticism of HB narratives has focused on the so-called primary history. In his own study, Alter also focused on this material and commented that it seemed to him that exilic and post-exilic materials were operating according to different practices (1981: ix). A thorough investigation of such differences is still awaited. In the meantime, other scholars have tended to see a great degree of similarity across the range of HB narratives, while still acknowledging that individual works have their own distinctive characteristics. For example, most of the generalisations about literary practices and conventions which Berlin (1983), Sternberg (1985) and Bar-Efrat (1989) have made were seen as applying to all HB narrative. Although unique features may be found in a particular narrative, they do not describe exilic or post-exilic narratives separately from pre-exilic, or put them in a different category. The assumption in this study is that it is valid to assume that EN may exhibit literary techniques identified in pre-exilic narratives, unless a good reason presents itself for not doing so.

One of the ways in which EN clearly does differ from most other HB narratives is in the proportionate amount of first-person narrative it has. Bar-Efrat notes this and concludes that therefore 'objective aspects of the events are intertwined with subjective ones in these narratives [EN]' (1989: 24). This raises the question of the

relationship between the author and the narrator when the narrator is a character in the narrative. In Ezra the narrator switches from third-person to first-person narrative, evidently identifying himself as Ezra (Ezra 7:28). In Nehemiah, Nehemiah's words are introduced by a narrator (Neh 1:1), thus complicating the situation slightly more. Nehemiah's 'memoir' continues until Neh 7:5. From that point until Neh 12:30, third-person narrative is followed. At Neh 12:31 the narrative reverts to first-person, without an identifying introduction. A reference to Nehemiah occurs in the third person at 12:47. 13:4-31 are again in first-person narrative without explicit identification of the speaker, although 13:6 seems to imply that it is Nehemiah. In the earlier discussion, the terms 'implied author' and 'implied reader' were introduced. At this point it is helpful to draw a further distinction. The implied author may be distinguished from the narrator. Whereas the implied author is 'the author as he or she would be constructed, based on inference from the text', the narrator is 'the one who tells the story' (Longman 1987: 84-85). Thus, when a character in the story relates events in the first-person, the character is the narrator. But the implied reader understands that the implied author has made a decision to include the character's narrating voice at that point. In assessing ways in which the Persian kings are portrayed in various sections of EN, it may be necessary to take into account the relationship between the implied author and the narrator at a given point.

The Concept of Character

Is a narrative character to be understood solely in terms of its textual function, or should he be thought of more like a person, with an assumed depth of personality that goes beyond what is explicitly stated in the text? Burnett has persuasively argued that the answer is: both.

A "character" is a construct developed during the reading process out of textual indicators such as proper names. A "character" is also an effect of the reading process. When the reading process is taken into account, it is clear that characterization should be considered as a continuum on which even secondary characters may achieve some degree of "individuality" (1993: 3).

It is possible to see how a character arises from the elements found in a given narrative. It is also possible to see that some aspects of a character are inferred by the reader based on the assumption that the character is like other people. The textual indicators combine with the readers' knowledge of what people are like. The implied author expects this to take place when the implied reader reads the text. An account of characterisation which fails to take this into consideration would seem to be inadequate. This is all the more so when a narrative is intended to be read as reflecting historical events. The characters in the text are supposed to correspond to actual people.

Burnett's discussion is in some ways similar to yet slightly different from Bar-Efrat's distinction between a character's function and nature (Bar-Efrat 1980: 163). In Bar-Efrat's scheme, a character's *function* has to do with the role or roles which that character plays in the plot. Examples include hero, opponent, instigator, pursuer or pursued. A character's *nature* involves what are often called traits, such as virtuous, vicious, loyal, disloyal, and so on. Chatman (1978: 121) takes his definition of a trait from J. P. Guilford's *Personality*: 'any distinguishable, relatively enduring way in which one individual differs from another'. Function tends to refer more to what a character does, while nature refers more to what a character is like. Thus, function seems to be more clearly dependent on plot: it is what he or she 'happens' to do in the particular story. Nature, by contrast, seems in some ways to extend beyond the borders of the narrative. It allows the reader to understand in general what the character 'was like' even before and after the narrated time of the story. Nature, however, is still based on textual indicators. In this respect it does not differ from function. At the same time, both function and nature may derive in part from attributing a psychological core to a character. Although function seems close to the idea of a character as actant, and nature is somewhat like seeing a character as an individual with a real personality, a complete correspondence between these two paradigms does not obtain.

Admittedly, this leaves a significant amount of room for judgment. There will always be a question about how much the reader's own experience should inform the construction of character. For example, Gunn and Fewell suggest that it is

appropriate for modern readers to 'speculate' about characters in biblical narratives. They feel that as long as they recognise it as speculation and not a definitive interpretation, and 'relate' it to 'what other readers are likely to regard as explicit features of the text', it is a legitimate procedure (Gunn and Fewell 1993: 50-51). 'Relating' is left somewhat vague. Of course, it is not disputed here whether theirs is a legitimate procedure. The aim in the present study, however, is to find as nearly as possible how the Persian kings are portrayed in EN from the standpoint of the implied author and implied reader. When it comes to determining what aspects of the characters' psychology the implied author intended the implied reader to construct, the intent is to be as historically plausible as possible. Rather than merely 'relating' the interpretation of character to explicit features of the text, the goal is for the interpretation to be controlled by the text. Although it is impossible in practice to achieve this aim completely, the assumption in this study is that when assessing the characterisation intended by the implied author, some ground is firmer than other ground. The objective is to stay on the firmest ground as much as possible. It is important, therefore, to be extremely cautious about the psychological side of the character construction process, being careful not to import modern tendencies into the reading.

In some literature, the implied reader may even have a different set of values from those held by the implied author. This usually generates considerable irony. In biblical narrative, however, the implied reader shares the world view of the implied author (Sternberg 1985: 136). The irony in the HB is produced by other factors. Although at times the implied author is attempting to persuade or challenge the implied reader, it is still on the basis of a wide range of shared assumptions which form a common world view. One may think of Auerbach's famous description of biblical narrative as 'fraught with background' (1953: 15). The shared background world common to implied author and implied reader is the preferred context in which to locate the significance of character portrayal. This again underscores the priority of textual indicators over psychological factors in the construction of character. As Rashkow says,

contradictory behavior in a biblical character may result from the psychic complexities the biblical writer imagined; however, they may result from the fact that the Bible is a literary narrative with a highly developed system of conventions. In other words, “character traits” may be more a function of the requirements of the story-line than personality. Thus, it can be argued that there is no room for “unconscious” motives in literary narratives, and that even those literary characters who seem like psychiatric textbook cases have objective correlatives for their behavior based on the needs of the plot. Viewed this way, the narrative world of the text explains, even if it does not always justify, what the biblical characters do (1993: 107).

It was previously noted that a normal part of the reading process involves attributing 'life-like' properties to characters encountered in the text. The emphasis in Rashkow's comment is that the 'narrative world' of the plot is the first place to look for context to explain a character's behaviour. Whether the explanation arising from the story-line is 'realistic' must be determined for each case.

The Identification of Character

The emphasis in this study, then, will be to follow the lead of the text of EN as it portrays the Persian kings. Burnett describes the procedure thus:

A character, then, is constructed by the reader from indicators that are distributed along the textual continuum. Traits are inferred by the reader from the indicators. The indicators themselves—discourse information (such as the narrator's statements, statements of other characters, setting, and so forth) and the speech and action of the character—are what is meant by “characterization” (1993: 5).

Day explains it like this:

Realizing character is a process of piecing the data together, filling in the gaps between the details with which we are provided. In essence, the reader needs to make sense of the actions of a story. And to do so, the reader looks for motivational, emotional, or psychological reasons for the characters to act as they do. We register the data given and then begin to organize its fragments into recognizable and coherent patterns and traits, checking our preliminary conclusions against further information as the plot progresses (1995: 20-21).

Of course, the aim is to be as rigorous as possible in this process, and not merely impressionistic. Reading closely, therefore, attention will be drawn to the

features in the text which work together to produce characterisation. This enables the judgements arrived at to be more easily assessed by others. Although reading does not normally happen this way, it is legitimate as an attempt to introduce a greater degree of objectivity.

To say that “character” is a construct that is developed during the reading process means, on the one hand, that character can be reduced to textuality. It can be dissolved into the segments of a closed text and/or the motifs from which it was constructed. The process of construction, in other words, can be reversed (Burnett 1993: 5).

It is possible to distinguish between a character in a narrative and the historical figure to whom the literary character corresponds. The character of Cyrus in Ezra is a representation of, and therefore distinct from, the historical figure who ruled the Persian Empire. We may further distinguish between what a character in a narrative is said to do (what he does in the 'narrative world') and what the corresponding historical figure actually did in history. These distinctions do not prejudice the question of the accuracy of the representation in any way. The literary portrayal may or may not be an accurate representation of the historical figure. It is simply that the two should be distinguished. One can then see that, for our understanding of the *portrayal of a character in the text*, what the literary character does in the text is more significant than what the historical figure that corresponds to that literary character actually did in a historical sense.

There is, however, a significant respect in which awareness of the historical background associated with the Persian kings mentioned in EN may be helpful in understanding how they are portrayed. Bar-Efrat has stated:

When discussing individuals who are considered to have existed in the past, like those in biblical narrative, it should be emphasized that we know them only as they are presented in the narratives, and it is to this alone that we can refer. We know nothing whatsoever about the real nature of the biblical characters, and we have no way of examining how accurately they are represented in biblical narrative (1989: 47-48).

This is not true with respect to the Persian kings. It is not true for modern readers, and it was not likely true for the earliest readers of EN. We cannot be sure how

much the author expected his readers to have learned from sources outside his own text about the Persian kings. Burnett, for instance, has argued that ancient audiences may have brought expectations about characters with them when they attended dramatic productions (1993: 14-15). He reasonably proposes that these expectations could have been based on the kinds of people that the audience knew from everyday life, and that they extended certain characteristics or traits to fictitious characters. On this basis, he contends that what modern readers perceive as minimal characterisation may have been understood in maximal terms by ancient audiences. How much more is it likely that audiences would bring assumptions about an actual and famous character to a text that names him, and that the author would expect them to (cf. Bar-Efrat 1989: 111; Merenlahti and Hakola 1999: 40).

At first sight, it may appear that Burnett's observation is nullified by Ben Zvi when he writes (rather along the lines of the quote from Bar-Efrat above) concerning the foreign monarchs who appear in Chronicles,

it is highly unlikely that the worldview and choice of language of these historical personages would be like those advanced in Chronicles. Yet neither (1) the narratee in the world of the book nor (2) a rereadership of the book of Chronicles that accepts the reliability of the narrator are informed by, nor relate in any way to the most likely viewpoint held by historical figures such as Necho, Sennacherib or a king of Tyre who ruled many centuries before the composition of the book of the Chronicles. This narratee and this rereadership are informed of and interact with the viewpoints of *textual* characters who populate the universe of the book of Chronicles (i.e. Chr.'s Necho, Chr's. Sennacherib and the like) (1999: 210 n. 7).

To clarify, however, it may be said that Ben Zvi is correct insofar as (even the initial) readers of Chronicles may have known little or perhaps nothing about Necho or Sennacherib as actual people. They had probably never met either one. But Burnett is correct to the extent that if the readers had ever heard of Necho or Sennacherib, famous people as they were, they would have brought mental associations with these characters to the text as part of the reading process. So Ben Zvi is correct to say that the reader interacts with the viewpoints of textual characters, as opposed to actual people, but the text (such as Chronicles) is probably not the only source informing the reader about these characters. The information readers have from outside the text

in question may or may not be historically accurate, but the implied author expects the implied reader to make the same associations as he does with the particular character. For example, the implied author of a modern narrative that included Adolph Hitler as one of its characters, especially if only briefly, would expect the implied reader to hold certain general assumptions about Hitler as a character, without having to create such a characterisation in the text.

It is appropriate to consider, then, what kinds of associations ancient readers may have made with the Persian kings who appear as characters in EN. Of course, we must proceed carefully in order not too quickly to assume that the information possessed today was available to the implied reader or understood in the same way. Again, the focus is on the text of EN and the effect achieved therein. The aim is to discern as nearly as possible the intent of the implied author. Extratextual material will only be brought into the discussion where the text itself gives reason to believe that the implied reader was aware of it.

Narrative Reticence

It is widely accepted in literary studies of HB narrative that the authors sought to achieve their literary aims while being as unobtrusive as possible. Alter claimed that, 'with minimal authorial intrusion', biblical authors achieved 'marked thematic direction as well as moral-psychological depth' in their rendering of narrative scenes (1981: 86). Hand in hand with their unobtrusive approach goes a tendency to register the full effect of their communicative effort gradually rather than all at once. The way Sternberg puts it is, 'the Bible . . . prefers the cumulative to the big-bang method of exciting notice' (1985: 248). Accordingly, we may expect that characterisation, as one aspect of narrative, will also be achieved through a cumulative process, perhaps even more than is the case with some other literature (Fokkelman 1999: 66). Furthermore, the gradual process is carried out over the sequence of the narrative. Thus, it is important to distinguish between character development and character disclosure (Sternberg 1985: 296). In the case of character development, the character is portrayed as changing in one or more ways over the course of time covered by the narrative. In the case of character disclosure, the traits of a character, which may

even be relatively static and unchanging, are revealed gradually over the course of the narrative. The reader may need to consider whether a specific character has changed at the end of the text from what he was at the beginning, or whether he has simply been more fully disclosed than he was at the beginning. Because of the author's unobtrusiveness and the fact that both development and (gradual) disclosure can only be effected through the sequence of the narrative, it can sometimes be difficult to tell which has taken place. Of course, both can occur with the same character within the same narrative.

The unobtrusive authorial approach in HB narrative not only contributes to gradual characterisation, it also results in a preponderance of indirect characterisation. *Direct* characterisation occurs when one or more traits of a character are stated explicitly. *Indirect* characterisation occurs when something the character thought, said, or did is revealed. When characterisation happens indirectly, the reader tends to forget that the judgement he has arrived at about the character in question has been mediated by the author's selection and presentation of events. The impression is that the character has been directly observed by the reader. The author's influence is much more obvious in direct characterisation. Since the authors of HB narrative tend to be unobtrusive, they rely on indirect characterisation to a greater degree than direct.

Sternberg has specified three areas in which the authors of biblical narratives typically withhold information, thereby contributing to the achievement of an unobtrusive style. These are: '(1) sharing with the reader all the plot information accessible to him; (2) elucidating structure and signification; (3) passing judgment by way of commentary' (1985: 184). He goes on to argue, however, that the inner life of the characters and the ethical value of their acts (item number 3) are systematically illumined by the use of repetition (1985: 438). The use and effects of repetition will be examined further below.¹⁰ The point here is that the portrayal of a character will more likely depend on repetitive material than on explicit commentary.

¹⁰ See p. 51.

The selectivity of biblical narrative means that every disclosure in the text shows something about the writer as well as the character represented. What has been chosen for inclusion reflects upon the norms and values of the implied author (Bar-Efrat 1978: 23). In other words, the portrayal of any character potentially has value judgments attached to it. This is of crucial importance. It is possible to formulate a relatively accurate description of a character as portrayed in a narrative without giving a clear account of the narrator's attitude toward that character. But that stops short of a full understanding of the portrayal. It is appropriate to ask not only 'what does this tell us about the character?' but also 'what does the implied author think about that (and want the implied reader to think)?'

With such considerations, ideology becomes a relevant factor. Lanser has commented on the presence of ideology in texts that are distinguished by narrative reticence:

Embedded ideology is ideology carried out at "deep-structural" levels of discourse, through value-laden lexis, register, and subordinated syntax . . . It is probable that the more deeply embedded an ideology, the greater its chance of being apprehended subliminally and accepted without argument (1981: 216-17).

She also recognises, however, that a deeply embedded ideology runs the risk of being misinterpreted (Lanser 1981: 218). The implied author's ideology, whether embedded or explicit, performs an important evaluative function in character portrayal. The ways in which characters are presented contributes to the disclosure of the implied author's ideology. Conversely, the more that is known of the implied author's ideology, the easier it is to know what his evaluation of a character is, judging by what the narrative discloses about that character. Ideology disclosure and character evaluation occur together, to some extent.

Narrative Discourse

The component of a narrative in which the implied author most obviously speaks for himself is narrative discourse. Sternberg has produced a list of the varieties of discourse used by the narrator when speaking in his own voice (1985:

120-21). The most significant for the purpose of this study appear to be the following:

1. *Expositional antecedents*, like the preliminaries concerning Job or the delayed mention of the Gibeonites (2 Sam 21:1-3). The exposition may unfold specific or general (Judg 16:4) information about the world, relate to individuals or groups, consist in external accounts or
2. *Character sketches*, usually in the form of one or two epithets, e.g., “Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field; Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents” (Gen 25:27). . . .
4. *Interscenic summary*: “He mourned for his son many days” (Gen 37:34), “Absalom dwelt two full years in Jerusalem” (2 Sam 14:28). . . .
6. *Prospects*: “Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death” (1 Sam 15:35). . . .
10. *Telescoped inside views*: “Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God” (Exod 3:6), “He went away in a rage” (2 Kgs 5:12).
11. *Notes and stage directions in dialogue*: “All the people answered with one voice” (Exod 24:3), “Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David and said” (2 Sam 6:20).

This is a useful typology for discussing narrative discourse.

Direct Characterisation

The most direct means of achieving characterisation is by authorial description. When the narrator states that a person in the story is righteous (and the reader has determined that this is the meaning of צדיק intended in context), there is no inference involved in understanding that the person has been portrayed as righteous.

The use of adjectives is perhaps the most perspicuous form of direct description. Another category is the use of epithets. Epithets usually occur in conjunction with, or in place of, proper names. In some cases (such as 'Ruth the Moabitess') they function either with or without the proper name as a kind of title. Epithets can include words which are adjectives, but often do not. Sternberg comments on the evaluative function of a single narratorial epithet thus: 'the evaluation [is] . . . solid but deprived of cumulative force and perceptibility . . . this may bear on all normative axes: social, emotional, ethical, ideological' (1985: 476).

Some of the most common epithets in the HB function to disclose a character's social relationships or status. Alter has noticed the significant effect of relational epithets in particular: 'when a relational epithet is attached to a character, or,

conversely, when a relational identity is stated without the character's proper name, the narrator is generally telling us something substantive without recourse to explicit commentary' (1981: 180). As examples he cites the effect of the change in reference to Michal as 'David's wife' in 1 Sam 19:11 from 'Saul's daughter' in 1 Sam 18:28, and the repeated identification of Tamar as Amnon's 'sister' in 2 Samuel 13. Gunn and Fewell point to the naming of Ruth as 'the Moabitess' (1993: 58). It would seem that the particular effect of these epithets is to locate the character within the social network of the narrative world, implying a concomitant set of expectations about behaviour and status.

Bar-Efrat points out that epithets most often connect a character with a nation, tribe, city, or geographical region (1989: 90). These, he rightly observes, do not give information about personality. He concludes that they thus identify, but do not characterise. That would seem to underestimate the effect of epithets, however. In the case of Ruth, her foreignness creates certain expectations about her behaviour. It may help to explain some of her reactions or highlight actions that are contrary to what a foreigner would normally do. In this way an epithet contributes to an overall portrait of the character, insofar as it gives information about a person's social roles and relationships.

Sternberg claims that, beyond contributing to direct characterisation, the function of epithets always 'consists in laying the ground for plot developments, so as to enhance their predictability or at least their intelligibility after the event. Ostensibly descriptive of the statics of character, all these epithets are implicitly proleptic within the dynamics of action' (1985: 331; similarly Bar-Efrat 1989: 114-15).

He goes so far as to claim that epithets determine a character's fate along ideological lines (Sternberg 1985: 341). Where an epithet is what would normally be considered a character trait, Sternberg may well be right. The 'worthless men' of Judg 19:22 bring destruction on the entire tribe of Benjamin. Where an epithet is simply an identifying title, it is less clear what the ideological implications might be. It is hard to know in what way Ruth's identification as a Moabitess determines her fate. It is true, however, that the conception of Ruth as a character is perceptibly

different from what it would be if the narrative made her a native Israelite. Epithets do work together with the action of the plot to heighten the reader's awareness of a character's nature. They carry expectations with them, even if vaguely defined, which may be realised or overturned.

An attribute of a slightly different sort is a character's name, or more specifically, the number of names the character is given. Most characters have precisely one name, and it functions primarily as a designator, distinguishing him from other characters. But some are referred to by more than one name. Burnett has concluded that a character with more than one name becomes more complex (1993: 20). This is especially so if the names or titles seem to be interchangeable.

Other characters are not given a name. Drawing on the ideas of Natanson, Reinhartz has examined the effect of anonymity on characterisation (1993: 120). In real life, people are aware of most other people only as agents, in specified roles. They usually do not know each other's names. In this sense, they see others as types. Learning someone's name makes that person seem more like an individual, less a mere type. Thus, it is possible to identify a relationship between the oppositions of anonymity and identification, on one hand, and agency and individuality on the other. An anonymous individual is more likely to be seen as a mere agent. Similarly, when a character's typical role or mere agency is emphasised, they seem like less of an individual. Conversely, one who has a name is more likely to be seen as an individual person.

But named characters may sometimes function in typical roles. Reinhartz goes on to show that there are plenty of characters in the books of Samuel who are named but function primarily as agents in the plot, with very little attention given to their individuality and personality (1993: 131-32). It is especially likely to be the case when the character is functioning in a typified social role known from biblical society. A particular kind of example which Reinhartz does not address is that in which a named character is referred to without the use of that name. Her study suggests that there may at times be a correspondence between anonymous appearances of characters and an emphasis upon them as mere agents at that point in the narrative. Since the kings of Persia are at times referred to anonymously in EN,

it is important to consider the extent to which they are functioning in a typified role on such occasions.

Even when a descriptive word does not function associatively between texts, it is still often the case that its full significance relies at least in part on implication. When characterisation occurs by implication, Garvey has identified four sources of such connections (1978: 75). One is logical, as in *x* is pregnant, therefore *x* is female. The second is cultural, as in *x* belched loudly after dinner, therefore *x* is rude. The implication depends on a context in Western culture. The third is generic, as in *x* is wearing a black hat, therefore *x* is bad. Here the context is the genre of the American western novel. The fourth he calls co-textual, as in *x* respected his mother, and Mrs. *Y* reminds him of her, therefore *x* respects Mrs. *Y*. At such a distance from the historical context of HB narrative, it is likely impossible to detect all the cultural or even generic implications. Garvey's classifications can be helpful, however, and it is appropriate to give careful attention to the evidence which the biblical text provides.

Indirect Characterisation

Speech

Apart from direct characterisation through the use of narrative statements about a character, the only other option available to the narrator is, by definition, indirect characterisation. This is by far the most common way for character to emerge in HB narrative. The textual phenomena which contribute to indirect characterisation are speech (including inner speech, or thought) and action. The use of speech may be further classified according to whether the character's own speech is presented, or the character is spoken to or about by some other character. Alongside this division is another common distinction, that between direct and indirect speech. Direct speech re-enacts the speech event. The impression it leaves on the reader is as though he has witnessed the character speaking. Indirect speech is presented as a report of what the character said. The reader is much more aware that the character's speech has been mediated through a third party. A character's speech in a narrative may appear as direct or indirect speech. Speech by a character to or about another

character may also be direct or indirect. All speech, however, whether by a character himself or about that character by another, direct or indirect, is an instance of indirect characterisation. Presenting the speech alone does not directly give the implied author's evaluation of the character in question. The reader will, however, almost certainly form opinions about the character from this information. Thus, it contributes to the portrayal of the character in the narrative indirectly.

As in real life, many judgments are formed about a character based on what he or she says. Naturally then, the speeches of a character in a narrative are a major factor contributing to the overall depiction. The implied author exercises control over the character-shaping process by choosing which speeches to include. Clearly the author can also colour the reader's perspective on a character by how he words the report of that character's speech in indirect discourse. But it seems that the author's choice of words may also be significant in direct speech as well. This is quite distinct from the question of whether the author has preserved a character's words with historical accuracy.

[W]e have seen that indirect speech in its most highly reduced form may be employed by the biblical narrator to indicate a scrupulous retelling of the speech event or its execution; conversely, direct speech may be condensed and reshaped by the narrator to achieve the particular goals of the narrative. The modern presuppositions that indirect speech is less faithful to the original locution, while direct speech is obligatorily a replica of the original, do not appear to have been operative for the biblical writers (Miller 1996: 407).

The implication of Miller's conclusion is that neither the implied author nor the implied reader required direct speech in a narrative to be a word-for-word echo of an original historical speech in order for the narrative account to be considered true. If this is so, then not only the inclusion, but also the wording of a character's direct speech is significant as evidence of his intentional portrayal by the narrator, since the narrator had latitude in deciding what form the speech would take.

Every instance of speech by a character is *prima facie* an instance of disclosure of the character's thoughts, beliefs, or intentions. When characters explicitly give information about their inner states or beliefs, this is very significant (Bar-Efrat 1989: 62-63). There are two important aspects of such disclosures. On one hand, if the reported information itself is accurate it will enrich the reader's understanding of

the character. On the other hand, whether the information is true or not, the reader learns about how the character wishes to be seen.

A character's speech may also be compared with other speeches. The speeches compared may be of two different characters, or of a single character at different temporal points. Differentiation between two characters on the basis of speech usually centres on a contrast of content (Alter 1981: 72). Thus, aspects of a character may be brought into sharper relief on the basis of how the content of his speech differs from that of another. Different speeches at different temporal points in a narrative may serve to present a fuller picture of the character (disclosure) or to show how the character has changed (development).

A character's speech may also be compared with an expected norm (Berlin 1983: 40-41). This also provides a framework for understanding the implications of the speech. It must be realised, however, that differing from some norms does not always reflect negatively on the speaker. It is important to try to perceive the implied author's purpose. When contrast with a specifically cultural norm occurs, Sternberg contends, 'a cultural breach always points to an informational gap, whose closure will either restore or replace the norm originally broken' (1985: 250). In other words, the effect of such a contrast may be to censure the character or to challenge the norm.

In determining the effect of a speech on characterisation, an important factor is the addressee of the speech. What a statement reveals about an individual can vary significantly, depending on whom he said it to. An interesting kind of case involves instances in which deferential language is used. On one hand, deferential language can serve as an index of social relations. On the other hand, as Miller has argued, it is the ideology of the narrator which ultimately controls the use of such language. 'As a result, no deferential language is used, for example, by Moses and Aaron in speaking to Pharaoh, nor by the prophet Elijah in speaking to Ahab or Jezebel' (Miller 1996: 280). The use of deferential language, then, can be an important part of the portrayal of characters and their relationships to each other. Yet the two facets mentioned above necessitate caution in judgement. As Miller also points out, no woman is addressed deferentially, but it is hard to tell whether that is a result of

social convention or an actual part of the text's ideology (1996: 280). The presence or absence of deferential language in situations where it might be expected, is by itself ambiguous.

More straightforward are instances in which speech is intended to arouse an emotion or attitude in the addressee (Bar-Efrat 1989: 70). This can shed light on the speaker, the addressee, and the relationship between them. Another type of speech with fairly clear implications for characterisation is imperative or directive. The speaker's intentions and aspirations are highlighted (Bar-Efrat 1989: 73). Direct speech to a character provides an opportunity to learn from the character's response, verbal or otherwise, when it is recorded (Bar-Efrat 1989: 73).

It was mentioned above that the way in which a character speaks about a past event or speech may reflect on the addressee. This is because the character may vary his account specifically to achieve a persuasive effect on his hearer (Sternberg 1985: 422). This is a complex type of case, reflecting on both characters involved and the nature of their relationship. A similar situation arises when one character speaks to another about the addressee himself. It may or may not directly reflect what the speaker actually thinks of the addressee, but it does disclose his attitude toward him on some level. In many cases it is not immediately apparent whether the narrator agrees with the speaker whose direct speech he presents (Bar-Efrat 1978: 23; 1989: 54).

Finally, there are cases in which a character speaks about another character, either to that other directly, or to a third party. These instances can affect the reader's view of both characters and of the relationship between them. The state of mind or intentions of the speaker may be demonstrated by the way he speaks of the other (Bar-Efrat 1989: 54). At the same time, a character's judgment of the actions of another often reveals information about both characters (Bar-Efrat 1989: 84). Because of the complexity attending the involvement of different points of view, it is necessary to proceed carefully in such examples.

Other features of a character's speech that may contribute to the reader's view of a character and to the understanding of his relationships with other characters

include syntax, tone, use of imagery, and brevity or lengthiness (Alter 1981: 182; Bar-Efrat 1989: 64-65).

Actions

The other major type of indirect characterisation involves the narration of a character's actions. Telling the reader what a character did contributes to the overall picture of that character. It is indirect, however, since actions themselves do not explicitly delineate character. Just as in real life the observer of an action may wonder about the motivation behind it, so in biblical narrative the reader may not immediately know what the implications of an action are for an agent's character. Supplementation by data from other actions, speech, or narrative commentary is required to bring about some clarity (Bar-Efrat 1989: 77-78).

One form of narrative commentary involves the connotations attached to the words the narrator uses to report the action. These reveal the narrator's attitude toward the action, and often toward the character also. The narrator states in Gen 16:6, for example, that Sarai 'dealt harshly' with Hagar (cf. Bar-Efrat 1989: 33). Sternberg explains further how this type of characterisation maintains narrative flow: 'Instead of superadding an evaluation, the narrator fuses it with the representation itself through normatively loaded phraseology, whether verbs ('abused', 'defiled') or referential terms ('He said to the doer of the wrong, Why dost thou strike thy fellow?' [Exod 2:13]). Each piece of language here does double duty, as plot (predication, reference) and as judgment. Note also how the distinction between deed and doer still holds in the examples' (1985: 476).

Of course, it must not be forgotten that inaction can be just as important as action (Bar-Efrat 1989: 83). The narrative may direct the reader's attention to a character's failure or reluctance to act. It may be done overtly, by narrative comment, or covertly, by describing events such that the character's inactivity is conspicuous by its absence, for example. When a character's inactivity stands out, it is probably an important part of how he is portrayed.

With respect to a proper understanding of characterisation through action, a couple of observations are in order. The interpretation of a sequence of events often depends on correctly perceiving the nature of the relationship between them.

Sometimes this is made relatively clear by the use of a connector such as 'ו. More often the relationship is left relatively ambiguous, with only a *waw* employed (Bar-Efrat 1989: 96). Other clues from the text must be utilised to arrive at a plausible reading. Also, when an action occurs, it is vital to take into consideration any information about that action which has been given proleptically in the narrative. Such material often amounts to an interpretation in advance (Bar-Efrat 1989: 179). It can shed important light on the characters involved in the particular action, and provide a deeper meaning than would be obtained from the report of the action itself.

Scale of Certainty

The various elements of characterisation have been placed on a scale indicating the relative confidence with which the reader may use them to make judgments about character (Alter 1981: 117). At the lower end of the scale are the character's actions or appearance. This kind of characterisation depends almost entirely on inference. The reader makes deductions or forms hypotheses about a character from this information. Actions may often be susceptible of interpretation in more than one way, however. Somewhat more reliable are statements made about the character by others and by the character himself. In the case of statements by other characters, their evaluations are put into words; we know what they think of the character. When a character makes statements, he reveals something about his thoughts and judgments, and this reveals something about him. In both instances, however, the picture generated may be unreliable. Other characters may misjudge the one about whom they speak, or may have reasons for speaking other than the truth. A character's own speech may not translate straightforwardly into information about him, because he may be intentionally trying to hide his true thoughts. Although speech is more explicit than action, its motivation may be equally ambiguous. Further up the scale are statements of a character's inward speech. At this point the reader actually knows the character's thoughts, but sometimes even these thoughts might be ambiguous in terms of the traits they represent. When the omniscient narrator makes a statement about what a character intends, feels or desires, however, these cannot be doubted.

Characterisation and Other Aspects of Narrative

The consideration of action as a contributor to characterisation is a reminder that the concept of 'character' in literary criticism is not easily separated from other aspects of a narrative. Often, each incident serves several purposes in the narrative, with characterisation only one of them (Bar-Efrat 1989: 85).¹¹ The same can be said of speech. As always, a given datum about character must be assessed in the context of the overall aim of the narrative. It has often been noted that there is a reciprocal relationship between plot and characterisation, each serving to further the other (e.g. Bar-Efrat 1989: 77). The plot typically 'develops from an initial situation through a chain of events to a central occurrence . . . and thence by means of varying incidents to a final situation' (Bar-Efrat 1989: 121). A character's role in this progression is properly grasped only when the plot development itself is understood.

*Narrative Point of View*¹²

In attempting to assess accurately how a character is being portrayed, the relationship between the narrative and the narrator must be taken into account. Bar-Efrat has given a good overview of this issue and the various possibilities that may obtain:

The best way of approaching narrators and their narrative modes is by examining the viewpoint from which they observe the events and through which the relationship between them and the narrative world is expressed. There are many possibilities in this respect, the most important for biblical narrative being:

1. Narrators who know everything about the characters and are present everywhere, as opposed to narrators whose knowledge is limited. The former see through solid walls into secret corners, even penetrating the hidden recesses of people's minds. The latter observe things from the outside, seeing what people do and hearing what they say, leaving it to us to draw conclusions about their inner lives.

¹¹ An incident is the smallest unit of biblical narrative. A scene is usually made up of several incidents and comes to an end when the participants change.

¹² Particularly helpful treatments of the subject of narrative point of view may be found in Berlin (1983), Polzin (1980) and Sternberg (1985).

2. Narrators who intrude into the story, adding comments and explanations, and whose existence is evident, as opposed to narrators who tend to be silent and self-effacing. The former type may refer to themselves or their methods in creating the narrative, they may address the reader directly or offer interpretations and evaluations of what is happening, while the latter will merely communicate the story itself.
 3. Narrators who relate what is happening from a remote perspective, offering a wide, panoramic view, as opposed to narrators who are close to the events, depicting them with the minimum of mediation, presenting scenes and letting the characters speak for themselves.
 4. Narrators who watch things from above, seeming to hover above the characters, as opposed to narrators who look at events from the viewpoint of one of the participants.
 5. Neutral or objective narrators as opposed to narrators who adopt a definite attitude about what they are relating. The former's [sic] mode of narration will be business-like, factual and devoid of personal involvement, while the latter's [sic] will evince approval or disapproval, acceptance or rejection, praise or censure, and perhaps even identification or abhorrence.
- These distinctions represent the extremes, and in actual fact the viewpoint of a narrative may be found anywhere between them. It is also obvious that these features can occur in any narrative in a variety of different combinations. It is not obligatory for a certain point of view to be maintained consistently throughout a narrative. One viewpoint may well predominate, but there is no reason why it should not be replaced by another from time to time (1989: 14-15).

It should be understood, however, that even where the narrator adopts an objective or neutral viewpoint, the communication is still value-laden. As Bar-Efrat also observes:

it cannot be said that the biblical narrators are completely objective. In actual fact, there is no such thing as a totally objective narration, for even if they do not conceal the characters' negative aspects and use a controlled and factual style, as biblical narrators do, this does not mean that they remain impartial towards their protagonists. It is true that their stance is indicated by implication rather than explicitly or obtrusively, but this method is no less efficacious than the direct and obvious one. On the contrary, just because it is not conspicuous and functions covertly, it tends to be more effective in transmitting narrators' values to the readers (1989: 33; similarly also Alter 1981: 87).

Sternberg, indeed, maintains that the Bible establishes 'an inverse proportion between the overttness and the transparence of judgment' (1985: 481). The narrator, then, is able to convey his evaluations effectively even if operating in a relatively covert mode.

Of course, this has important implications for characterisation. All information in a narrative is presented from some point of view. 'It is impossible to discuss

character without reference to point of view, for, after all, a character is not perceived by the reader directly, but rather mediated or filtered through the telling of the (implied) author, the narrator, or another character' (Berlin 1983: 43). The dynamics of point of view emerge most clearly in so-called scenic narration. Narration is said to be scenic when the plot is presented dramatically, action by action, speech by speech, giving the reader the impression that he is witnessing events as they unfold (Licht 1978: 29; Alter 1981: 63; Berlin 1983: 46). The difference is between reporting a state of affairs and presenting the state of affairs as experienced from the point of view of a group of characters in the story. Since scenic narrative presents what characters say and do in a relatively vivid and direct manner, there is great potential for relating the material from various points of view.

Not only can the point of view of different persons be presented (e.g., various characters, the narrator), but point of view itself can be understood in different ways. A helpful scheme has been set forth by Chatman (1978: 151-53). He speaks of the perceptual point of view—through which the events of the narrative are perceived, the conceptual point of view—which reflects particular attitudes and world view,¹³ and the interest point of view—which has to do with benefit or advantage.

Point of view is an important element in the creation of irony. Berlin (1983: 51-52) quotes Uspensky in this regard: 'Irony occurs when we speak from one point of view, but make an evaluation from another point of view; thus for irony the nonconcurrence of point of view on the different levels is a necessary requirement'.

Irony is an important factor when present in a character's portrayal. The narrator can easily bring it about through his own discourse, shifting from one point of view to another. In the process, a set of expectations arises which is otherwise known, simultaneously or perhaps subsequently, to be inadequate or unachievable. Absalom thinks his long, beautiful hair will help him become king. As things turn out, it contributes directly to his ultimate demise. Sometimes, however, the narrator uses the discourse of another character, rather than the narrator's own discourse, to portray a character ironically (Sternberg 1985: 208). An example of this may be

¹³ Other writers refer to this as the ideological point of view, e.g., Arnold (1996: 3).

found in the interaction between David and Uriah. Uriah's responses to David repeatedly show his conduct to be morally superior to that of the king, even though he speaks to the king with the utmost respect. Rather than the narrator's direct commentary, or even the narrator's perspectival manoeuvring, the direct speech of the characters provides the discord of presentation and evaluation.

One of the functions of irony is as an implicit commentary by the author, and it is usually evidence of the text 'taking an "attitude" to its "subject matter"' (Chambers 1978: 327-28). Extratextual agreement on the part of implied author and implied reader is essential. The assumptions are not stated in the text itself, and if implied author and implied reader do not share them, the ironic commentary does not work. It is worthwhile determining, in cases of perceived irony, what the author's attitude to his subject matter is.

As mentioned earlier, it is assumed in biblical narrative that the implied author and implied reader do share the same values. It may therefore be said that they share the same conceptual point of view. Thus, when point of view is used to create irony in biblical narrative, the discrepancy will be between the point of view of the implied author and that of one or more characters. This requires careful attention on the part of modern readers. Fewell and Gunn are of the opinion that '[t]he most common error readers of biblical narratives make is confusing a character's point of view with that of the narrator'. The antidote they offer is to compare and contrast carefully what the narrator tells the reader directly with what the characters say (1992: 1025).

It was noted earlier that the narrator may choose to express himself (*narration*) in words substantially or exactly similar to those used by a character (*direct discourse*). At times, the purpose may be to emphasise the words used by the character or draw attention to their veracity. On the other hand, the narrator may be adopting that character's point of view with the intent of perpetrating irony. The further possibility should here be added that adoption of the character's point of view may be signalled by such verbal similarity even where no irony is intended (Berlin 1983: 64).

Implications of Reading as a Sequential Act

The fact that a text can only be read in sequence over a period of time implies that characterisation cannot be achieved in an instant, but is a process.¹⁴ Sternberg points out that the incomplete nature of the information given to the reader at any point along the way produces impressions which will prove to be more or less right as the story goes on (1985: 199). He uses the term 'gap' to refer to questions raised by the narrative which require an answer in order to maintain coherence, but which the text itself does not answer. Many gaps are temporary, eventually being closed by the narrative. But readers will tentatively fill them with hypotheses, or at least recognise what some of the potential answers are. The sequential nature of a text means that the narrator continually creates gaps, and the process of character disclosure involves the reader in constant re-evaluation and adjustment of a character's portrait (cf. Gunn and Fewell 1993: 51). Of course, it is impossible for the narrator to supply answers to all the questions which his story has raised (cf. Sternberg 1985: 323-24).

In the process of character construction, the order in which information is revealed is significant, and so is the setting in which events happen and speeches take place. Darr has argued that one can create almost any character one wants by manipulating data without regard for order and setting (1993: 53). This is certainly true, because the sequential order of events and states of affairs provides the context within which revelations about characters become meaningful. Setting can easily be seen to be closely related. As part of the circumstances under which a character says or does something it is important information. In fact, change of setting is often an important marker of sequence. Also, first impressions of a character tend to be strong. Alter claims that the way in which characters are introduced, particularly when and how they speak, often gives important information about them (1981: 74). What the narrator chooses to reveal early on provides the foundation on which other information builds and will therefore shape the finished product in a unique way.

¹⁴ See above on disclosure and development, p. 34.

Further Considerations on the Use of Repetition

A prominent feature of HB narrative that has received considerable attention is the use of parallel situations. Although biblical narratives do not employ symmetrical double plots, they do create parallel situations repeatedly. Similar motifs occur again and again. Alter finds that the parallels provide moral and psychological commentary on each other (1981: 91-92). He gives as an example the string of sibling struggles in Genesis, with the younger continually displacing the elder. Analogies and parallels are a particularly useful way of providing evaluation of characters without resorting to explicit commentary (Alter 1981: 180).

Berlin subsumes plot parallels of all sorts under the term 'narrative analogies'. She maintains that these as well as character contrasts are a signal to read one story in terms of another (1983: 136). Gunn and Fewell put it more broadly: 'Repetition and variation can equate and contrast events or characters or even whole other texts through association, inviting the reader to consider the significance of similarities and dissimilarities' (1993: 148). The fact is that similarities of any kind may prompt a reader to associate one text with another and notice similarities and differences between them. The question is always to what degree the implied author intended this. The answer involves some assessment of whether the implied reader knows of the other text, and the amount of evidence in the present text in favour of concluding that an association is intended. Gunn and Fewell state that, generally, the use of similar or identical words and phrases, similar grammatical structures, or similarly constructed narrative situations are recognised as providing such evidence, to greater or lesser degrees (1993: 163). The effects of allusion that they affirm include foreshadowing and helping the reader fill gaps in terms of character motivation or social expectation. Relevant here is Sternberg's discussion of similarity patterns in the Bible (1985: 365-66). He finds four levels on which similarity patterns are manifested:

1. On the levels of sound and linguistic sense, similarity patterns verbal units into or according to such relations as verbatim equivalence ("Abraham, Abraham!" in the Binding of Isaac, the root "bless" in the Wooing of Rebekah), synonymy ("man of God" = "seer" = "prophet"), antonymy ("older" and "younger" in fraternal struggles), homonymy (*nabi* in Saul's first encounter

with Samuel), syntactic parallelism (the wrangling of the prostitutes in Solomon's Judgment), etc.

2. On the level of plot, it assumes the form of equivalences and contrasts between events, characters, and situations (Ishmael's and Isaac's ordeals, Deborah and Barak, anointment scenes).

3. On the thematic level, it consists in more abstract linkages: variations on a theme, like the younger brother's ascendancy.

4. On the generic level, it ties together the pieces of verse (e.g., Hannah's song at the beginning and David's at the end of Samuel) set into a prose frame or contrasts the straight rendering of an event to its rehearsal as parable (e.g., Jotham's on Abimelech and Shechem), and so forth.

By way of further explication of these kinds of effects, Sternberg has provided a list of 'frameworks' which can be used to explain the effects of apparent redundancies in biblical narrative (1985: 438-39). The most significant for the purposes of this study appear to be: (1) the framework of presentational dynamics—exemplified in Micaiah's prophecy in 1 Kgs 22:15 in which he repeats the words of the false prophets and gives an unexpected twist to his interaction with the king; (2) the perspectival framework—evident whenever the way in which material is repeated indicates a change has taken place in the point of view from which the action is being told; (3) the framework of judgment—using repetition to enable evaluative appraisal, such as in the creation account of Genesis 1, where the description of what came into being matches exactly what God called for by word, or Genesis 7, where repetition serves to highlight the scrupulousness of Noah's obedience, or 1 Kings 21, where Ahab's variance in reporting Naboth's speech reflects unfavourably on him; (4) the compositional framework—when repetition draws attention to a change in the focus of interest, a movement from the general to the particular, or the resumption of a suspended narrative thread. These frameworks can be useful in conceptualising the effects of repeated material in the narrative. They can be applied to repetition involving speech as well as repetition which does not involve speech. The emphasis is that when material is repeated in some form, the reason is not merely to provide the reader with information, since it has already been given previously. Rather, repetition serves some other purpose.

Degrees of Characterisation

It has become customary to assess characters in narrative according to the degree to which they emerge as unique individuals. Berlin's distinctions seem to be useful:

I see here three categories (not the usual two—flat and round) and to avoid confusion I will rename them. The round character is the *full-fledged character*; the flat character is the *type*; and the functionary is the *agent*. All can be found in biblical narrative, and the same person may appear as a full-fledged character in one story and as a type or agent in another (1983: 23-24).

She explains these categories further:

There is no real line separating these three types; the difference is a matter of the degree of characterization rather than the kind of characterization. One might think of them as points on a continuum: 1) the agent, about whom nothing is known except what is necessary for the plot; the agent is a function of the plot or part of the setting; 2) the type, who has a limited and stereotyped range of traits, and who represents the class of people with these traits; 3) the character, who has a broader range of traits (not all belonging to the same class of people), and about whom we know more than is necessary for the plot (Berlin 1983: 32).

Bathsheba, in 2 Samuel 11-12, and Abishag are seen as examples of agents, Abigail is said to be a type, and Bathsheba reappears as a full-fledged character in 1 Kings 1 (1983:30-32). To this may be added the distinction that a character who develops in the course of the narrative is more likely to be seen as a full-fledged or round character, and one who does not tends to be considered flat (Bar-Efrat 1989: 90). It should be noted that to say that a character functions as a type in a narrative is not necessarily to say that little can be inferred about him or her. In fact, a type, as representative of a class of people, may bring a substantial number of assumed characteristics to his role in the story. Berlin has expressed the idea well:

Artists and cartoonists know that a person or scene can be suggested by the curve of a line or the shape of a blob. Minimal representation can give maximum illusion. In many cases a minimal description of a character, especially of one outstanding trait, is that magic line of suggestion around which the reader fills in the picture (1983: 137).

This is consistent with the earlier observation that readers bring expectations with them to a text that refers to a historical person as a character.

Sternberg has emphasised that biblical characters are invested with a great deal of individuality (1985: 347-48). He points out that, over the course of the plot, they often surprise the reader with their behaviour. He argues on this basis that biblical characters are not 'types'. His observations are pertinent and provide an appropriate warning against assuming that a character *must* behave according to certain presumed motivations and characteristics based on stereotype. The reader must follow the direction in which the text goes. But it is also true that some of the very surprise to which Sternberg refers comes from expectations pre-loaded into particular character types. The text does not take the time to tell the reader what each character is like before including them in the action. Rather, as Berlin says, the minimal description is often expected to produce significant shaping for the time being. The experience of surprise is itself proof that a meaningful portrayal had already been achieved. Sternberg's remarks are most accurate if applied to the more central characters in biblical narrative. It was mentioned earlier that the degree to which a character's personality is developed may be placed on a continuum, so that categories such as agent, type, and fully-developed are not understood as rigid. Here we see that there can be a kind of overlap, whereby a character partakes of stereotypicality but also acquires distinctiveness.

The portrayal of a character as a type is related to the wider interpretational context of the narrative.

[W]hen we consider a character as a type, we are moving away from considering him as an individual character and moving toward considering him as part of some larger framework. This framework may be moral, theological, referable to some extra-literary scheme; or it may be referable to part of the narrative situation itself (Scholes and Kellogg 1966: 204).

In explaining the issue this way, the emphasis is not on the difference in degree of characterisation between a type and a full-fledged character. Rather, the focus is on the difference in the way each is related to the larger interpretational framework of the narrative. A type has more of a symbolic function than a more individualised character has. The important question for understanding types is what the

connotations of any particular type were for the implied author and reader.

Connotative connections are important with full-fledged characters also. Because they are invested with a greater number of specific traits, however, the connotations pertain to the diverse traits rather than to a stereotype. Another way to look at it is that if a character were not invested with diverse traits, but only with those which were connected to a certain class of people, he would be a type.

Bar-Efrat rightly points out (1989: 87) that the degree of flatness or roundness of a character, or the degree to which he is a major or minor character, is not as important as the actual role the character plays in the narrative. It is in connection with this role that the character's traits and ultimate portrayal gain significance.

Group Portrayal

It should also be mentioned that it is not uncommon for group members to be portrayed collectively. In the HB, Sternberg has understood Joseph's brothers to be depicted as having a collective psyche in the Joseph narratives (1985: 296). This is an interesting example because Reuben and Judah are developed somewhat as individuals. It would seem to be another case in which a character may partake of typical qualities but also have a measure of uniqueness.

Continual Complexity and Ambiguity

Alter maintains that there is '... an abiding mystery in character as the biblical writers conceive it ...' (1981: 126). The methods used to portray characters ensure that many questions about them remain unanswered. Sternberg finds an opportunity within this state of affairs for the author to elicit a complex response from the reader. '[The narrative] does not hesitate to mix our feelings about the parties to the conflict by increasing (or decreasing) the appeal of each in relation to a different standard of judgment' (1985: 55). Thus, it is often not possible to classify a portrayal simply as positive or negative. As Sternberg also says (1985: 157), 'polar portraiture' is rare in biblical narrative. When motivations are left unstated and unclear, the possibility arises that a combination of motives may be behind a given action or series of actions (Bar-Efrat 1989: 78). The reader will naturally consider the options that have been supplied by the text but also realise that in some cases the motives of a character may

simply be undisclosed. But as Sternberg says (1985: 495), the techniques which the biblical authors use to keep a situation from being overly simplistic also work rhetorically to good persuasive effect.

It follows from these considerations that a facile approach to the phenomenon of characterisation is inappropriate. The accurate discernment of the narrator's portrait of any character requires careful attention to detail and recognition of how various features of the text may contribute to the overall effect. The context of the entire text plays a vital role, as the implied author's portrayal can only be fully comprehended within his larger purpose. A satisfactory account is one which follows the twists and turns of the text, giving all the data the due consideration indicated for them by their literary role in the narrative.

CHAPTER 2: EZRA 1-2

The first Persian king mentioned in the book appears in the very first verse. Ezra 1:1-4 introduces and gives the text of a proclamation issued by Cyrus. Ezra 1:5-11 then narrates the response to this edict, after which the narrative does not affect the characterisation of any Persian kings until Ezra 3:7.

Ezra 1

Verse 1a

The first verse begins with a date formula. Dates in ancient near eastern texts were typically determined with reference to the length of reign of a recognised king. Since the date formula at the beginning of v. 1 refers to Cyrus, he is immediately introduced as a very significant ruler, if not the most significant, in the context of the narrative. Cyrus's own speech in v. 2 shows that he considers himself to be king over virtually all the known earth. The narrator's perspective in v. 1 is consonant with Cyrus's view, and does not contradict it elsewhere. The reader thus begins to understand from the outset that Cyrus is the political figure in charge in this narrative.

The identification of the time of the narrative as Cyrus's first year requires clarification of the perspective from which the years are being numbered. Since the narrative of EN deals chiefly with matters of interest to Judean readers and is composed mainly in Hebrew, the implied reader appears to be Judean.¹⁵ From the perspective of such readers, the first year of Cyrus would be the first year in which he ruled over the Judean exiles, or 539.¹⁶ Cyrus had, in fact, been 'king of Persia' that is, ruler over the people known as Persians, since 559, 20 years before the time in which the events of EN are set. Before seizing the Babylonian empire, however,

¹⁵ See above, p. 13.

¹⁶ All dates are BCE.

Cyrus was in no position to give orders that affected the Judean exiles living in Babylon, as he is seen to do in this chapter. It may confidently be concluded, then, that the date given in the text implies that Cyrus had taken control of the Babylonian empire prior to the events narrated.

The immediately preceding discussion has implications for the significance of the title 'king of Persia'. 'The first year of Cyrus, king of Persia' does not mean 'the first year of Cyrus *as* king of Persia'. 'King of Persia' thus functions as part of Cyrus's name, identifying him (Williamson 1985: 9). In the context of the narrative, he is the new ruler of what was previously the empire of the king of Babylon.¹⁷ Although he is 'king of Persia', insofar as he is in year one he is effectively the next in the series of foreign rulers who have exercised power over the Judeans, extending as far back as the Assyrians (Fleishman 1998). This is an important piece of information in trying to determine the connotations implicit in this particular title. To be 'king of Persia' is not incompatible with succession to rule over the Babylonian empire.

The combined significance of the mention of Cyrus's first year and of his designation as king of Persia could be expressed by saying that Cyrus, the king of Persia, was in his first year of reign as king of Assyria-Babylonia-Persia. Here another implication of this title should be mentioned. It indicates that he is neither Babylonian nor Assyrian by descent, although he functions as heir to their empire. This is supported by the fact that although the usual title for Cyrus in inscriptions was 'king of Babylon',¹⁸ he was referred to as 'king of Persia' in the Nabonidus Chronicle and by various Greek authors writing within the Persian period (Wilson 1917). Since, by any account, EN was written long after the reign of Cyrus, the narrator's use of the title 'king of Persia' will have carried the connotations current at the time of his writing, regardless of the connotations it may have carried in Cyrus's own day. In other post-exilic HB texts, such as 2 Chron. 36:20, the kingdom of Persia is distinguished ethnically and sequentially from the kingdom of Babylon.

¹⁷ It is important to try to determine the connotations associated with this designation, since epithets of place frequently carry expectations; see above, p. 39.

¹⁸ See the discussion of title used by the Persian kings, p. 62.

'King of Persia', then, serves to emphasise Cyrus's ethnicity as one who has come to his position from outside Assyria-Babylon. Moreover, the prophecies of Jeremiah were clear that there would be restoration for Judah only after the time of the king of Babylon had ended.¹⁹ In this regard, it is necessary for Cyrus to be depicted as a non-Babylonian in a report about restoration. This is an example of what Garvey calls co-textual implication. Two characteristics are linked together at some point (e.g., 'non-Babylonian' and 'facilitator of restoration') and then one of them ('non-Babylonian') is attributed to a character, thereby linking the other with him also.²⁰

This epithet also contributes to his characterisation in another subtle way, however. Cyrus is the ruling king over the exiled Judeans. Yet his identification as king of Persia marks him as a foreigner from the Judean perspective. Throughout EN, the question of the boundary between who is and who is not a part of 'YHWH's people' (v. 3) and the need to observe that boundary are prominent.²¹ Later in the book, clear distinctions will be made by Judeans between 'our kings' and 'their kings' (Neh. 9:24, 32, 34), with the latter referring to the kings of peoples other than the nation that came out of Egypt in the exodus (Neh. 9:9ff). As king of Persia, then, Cyrus is clearly one of 'their kings', whatever the implications of that may turn out to be.

Cyrus has been referred to, but only somewhat indirectly as part of a date formula. Before he (or anyone) acts in the narrative, the word of YHWH through Jeremiah is introduced. The fulfilment of this word is presented as foundational or motivating in some way for the action of YHWH which follows (v. 1b), which in turn is the causal agent for Cyrus's action in vv. 1b-4. The reader must understand, therefore, that the events about to be narrated are vitally connected to 'the word of YHWH from the mouth of Jeremiah'. Cyrus's actions (or at least their results) are thus presented as having been announced by YHWH in the past. By setting events within this prophetic framework, the narrator creates the perception that the story about to unfold is the outworking of YHWH's preconceived plan. As such, it

¹⁹ See further below, p. 60.

²⁰ See above, p. 40.

²¹ cf., e.g., Ezra 4:1-3; 6:21; 9:2; Neh. 2:20; 9:2; etc.

emphasises that YHWH is the one who is really in control, however it may look to observers on the human plane.

The reference to the word from Jeremiah's mouth raises the question of just which such word the reader is to think of. Based on the content of Cyrus's proclamation that follows, most commentators have understood the reference to be to the 'seventy-year prophecy', which foretells a return from captivity for the exiles from Judah (e.g. Clines 1984: 34-35; Blenkinsopp 1988: 74).²² Some have suggested that the seventy years are reckoned from the destruction of the temple in 586 or 587 to its completion in 515 (Clines 1984: 35). On this understanding, Cyrus's decree in vv. 2-4 contributes to the eventual fulfilment of Jeremiah's word rather than immediately bringing it about.

Williamson thinks this interpretation is 'far too generalized' (1985: 9-10). He believes that it originates with the similar reference to 'the word of YHWH by the mouth of Jeremiah' in 2 Chron. 36:21. The context in 2 Chronicles refers explicitly to 'seventy years'. Since many scholars believe that EN is the conclusion of the books of Chronicles, they naturally read that context into the reference in Ezra 1. Williamson, who treats Chronicles and EN as separate works, suggests instead that Jer. 51:11 is the text in the narrator's mind in EN. That passage states that 'YHWH has stirred up (הָעִירָה, as in Ezra 1:1) the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it, for that is the vengeance of YHWH, the vengeance for his temple'. He goes on to claim that 'because of the catchword הָעִירָה ("stir up") and the explicit reference to Cyrus, he [the author of EN] would have expected his readers to interpret the negative prophecy of Jer 51 in the light of the positive statements of Isa 41, 44, and 45 . . .' (Williamson 1985:10). The specific texts Williamson has in mind are Isa. 41:2, 25; 44:28 and 45:13. The first two and the fourth use the hiphil stem of the verb עָוַר and the third and fourth use the name of Cyrus. All four are commonly understood as referring to Cyrus as the object of YHWH's stirring,²³ and the third explicitly states that Cyrus is to rebuild the city of

²² Jer. 25:11-14; 29:10.

²³ E.g. Westermann (1969: 64-65), Oswalt (1998: 81), Baltzer (2001: 227), Seitz (2001: 352-53).

Jerusalem and its temple. Thus, the argument goes, the reader should connect these instances of stirring, the name of Cyrus, and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem as integral parts of a single divine scheme, the implementation of which is announced by Ezra 1.

Williamson's suggestion is quite plausible, but if the narrator intended the reader to make associations on the basis of common vocabulary and concepts, the overlap between Ezra 1 and both Jeremiah 51 and the passages from Isaiah 41-45 would seem sufficient that no explicit reference to either Jeremiah or Isaiah should be necessary. The mention either of both prophets or of neither prophet would seem more appropriate than mention of Jeremiah only. The narrator has chosen, however, to draw the reader's attention particularly to Jeremiah.

Applegate (1997) has highlighted the fact that Jeremiah's prophecies concerning the 'seventy years' seem to have had a high profile in the exilic and post-exilic religious consciousness of the Judeans. The several references to them preserved in the HB point in this direction.²⁴ Even if it could be demonstrated that the parallel passage in 2 Chron. 36:22-23 is a later reuse of Ezra 1:1-3a (e.g. DeVries 1989: 9), it must be admitted that its reference to Jeremiah's prophecy, which is understood from its preceding context to be the seventy-year prophecy, fits that interpretation very easily. In other words, the editor of Chronicles did not have to emend the text in any way for it to function as an allusion to the seventy years.

As the text stands in Ezra 1:1, then, it may not be inappropriate to give it a 'generalised' interpretation. Given the apparent prominence of the seventy-year prophecy in the post-exilic mind, such a general reference as exists in Ezra 1:1 would as likely be associated with that prophecy as with any other. What is suggested here is that the reader of EN could easily have connected the overthrow of Babylon from Jeremiah 51 with the end of the seventy years of service to Babylon from Jeremiah 25 and 29. Whether the Cyrus texts from Isaiah were intended to be drawn in to supplement those from Jeremiah is not necessary to decide, although Williamson's proposal seems probable. The reason the narrator chose to refer to Jeremiah would

²⁴ Zech. 1:2; 7:5; Dan. 9:2; 2 Chron. 36:21.

be to call the seventy-year prophecy to mind along with Jeremiah 51. Rather than focusing on a specific fulfilment, the intent is to evoke a conceptual context drawn from Jeremiah, within which the reader can place the events of the present narrative. The period of exile is drawing to a close; YHWH has brought 'the Medes' against the Babylonians.

To state the obvious, it is not clear (to modern readers) what precisely the narrator is alluding to when mention is made of Jeremiah's prophecy. Williamson has made a strong case for his view, and it seems equally plausible that some allusion to the seventy-year prophecies is intended. It may even be possible to argue, as above, that a rather comprehensive understanding of Jeremiah's prophetic program of restoration, including both Williamson's and the 'seventy-year' interpretations stands behind Ezra 1 (hence, the general reference to Jeremiah). No matter which of the options listed above may be preferred, it must be noted that all of them point to texts which emphasise YHWH's role in restoring the exiles to the land of Judah, punishing the Babylonians, or obtaining vengeance for the destruction of the temple. This is consonant with the reference to prophecy in Ezra 1. In fact, even an extreme interpretation, which might argue that the reader does not or cannot know which words from Jeremiah's mouth are in view here, must recognise that the effect of the allusion to YHWH's word through his prophet is to establish the primacy of YHWH's will in what is about to transpire. The events are presented as contributing to the accomplishment of his purposes. Further, the narrator presents himself as knowledgeable about how the events he describes relate to YHWH's plans, even if the reader may be left somewhat unsure of the exact connection.²⁵

A further observation may now be made in connection with the epithet 'king of Persia'. It has been pointed out by a number of scholars that the inscriptions available to researchers indicate that, after his accession to power over Babylon, Cyrus typically referred to himself as 'king of Babylon', and not 'king of Persia' (Bedford 2001: 120-22). There is evidence that 'king of Persia' continued to be used

²⁵ The theme of YHWH's foreknowledge demonstrating his dominion over earthly events appears in other HB literature as well, including Isaiah 40-48, in which Cyrus is prominent, cf. Bedford (2001: 76-77 n. 77).

in the western part of the empire (Clines 1984: 34 and the literature cited there; cf. Bach 1993: 49), so it is hard to know whether this title would have seemed unusual to an ancient reader. In light of the preceding remarks about the setting evoked by reference to Jeremiah, however, the use of 'king of Persia' seems more appropriate than 'king of Babylon'. In Jeremiah the Babylonians are the captors who are to be overthrown in order for the Judean exiles to be restored to their land. In his role as restorer in Ezra 1, it is fitting that Cyrus be portrayed as a 'non-Babylonian' (cf. Gunneweg 1985: 41).

The reader is introduced to Cyrus as the king who exercises rule in the setting of the narrative. He is said to be in his first year of rule, which, for purposes of the narrative, means his first year of rule over the Judean exiles. This is consistent with a characterisation of him as heir to the empire once ruled over by the Assyrians, and successively by the Babylonians. The epithet, 'king of Persia', attached to his name, functions mostly as part of his name, but also subtly marks him as both non-Babylonian (coming to a position of rule over the Assyrian-Babylonian empire from 'outside') and non-Judean. As a non-Babylonian, he represents the realisation of the end of Babylonian domination prophesied in Jeremiah. His action is portrayed as subordinate to that of YHWH, regardless of what precisely the narrator has in mind when referring to Jeremiah's prophecy.

Verse 1b

The subject of the first finite verb of v. 1 is YHWH, and the object of the verb is the spirit of Cyrus. Having been introduced as king of Persia, Cyrus is immediately depicted as the passive object of YHWH's action. Moreover, Cyrus appears unaware of YHWH's action.

It is important to be aware of connotations attached to the specific wording the implied author uses to report action.²⁶ The construction הָעִיר אֶת־רוּחַ is used in the HB to denote YHWH causing an agent to do something that accomplishes one of

²⁶ See above, p. 44.

YHWH's specific aims.²⁷ Where it is used in Jeremiah and Chronicles, those whose spirits are stirred are foreigners who would be thought of by the reader as unaware of YHWH's intentions.²⁸ Even in Haggai, where it is Zerubbabel, Joshua and 'the remnant of the people' whose spirits are stirred, the stirring appears as a motivation to act that is in addition to, and therefore distinct from, the cognitive communication which they had just received through Haggai (cf. Petersen 1984: 58-59). The use of the identical construction in regard to the heads of the families shows that the phrase does not entail a choice on the part of those who are stirred. It is precisely all who were stirred who respond. It is something God does behind the scenes.

Other texts depict YHWH's influence on the inner being of a foreign king with slightly different language. In 2 Kgs. 19:7, YHWH speaks of 'putting a spirit within' (רוּחַ נָתַן בוֹ) the king of Assyria, so that he will hear a rumour and return to his own land. Probably the most celebrated such example involves the 'hardening' (with קָדַח or כָּבַד) of Pharaoh's heart (Exod. 4:21; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8). In both of these examples also, it is clear that the one affected by YHWH's intervention is unaware of YHWH's intentions.

It is worthy of note that in Isa. 45:13 (and likely in Isa. 41:2, 25), YHWH is said to stir (הָעִיר) Cyrus, although his spirit is not specifically mentioned. Cyrus appears to be portrayed as unaware of YHWH's intentions (Seitz 2001: 393-95). Regardless of Cyrus's level of awareness that YHWH is stirring him, the 'stirring' itself does not seem to impart knowledge of YHWH's intentions to him.

In Ezra 1:1, the emphasis is similarly on YHWH stirring Cyrus up to perform a particular action. The author does not explain *how* Yahweh 'stirred up' (or 'awakened') Cyrus (Holmgren 1987: 4). There is no implication that YHWH communicates a message to Cyrus, even though what YHWH stirs Cyrus to do is to send a message throughout his kingdom. In this way the narrator reinforces the concept, introduced by reference to the fulfilment of YHWH's word from Jeremiah, that YHWH is in control over what might seem to be human endeavours (Smith-

²⁷ Jer. 51:1, 11; Hag. 1:14; 1 Chron. 5:26; 2 Chron. 21:16.

²⁸ The kings of the Medes, Jer. 51:11; King Pul (Tiglath-Pileser) of Assyria, 1 Chron. 5:26; the Philistines and Arabs, 2 Chron. 21:16.

Christopher 2001: 311). The narrator presents Cyrus as YHWH's agent rather than as YHWH's spokesman. This will be discussed further with reference to v. 2.

Becking writes that the stirring implies cooperation between YHWH and Cyrus (1999: 268). This would be true only if 'cooperation' is meant in the sense of simultaneous operation or influence, as 'co-ownership' refers to simultaneous ownership by two or more parties. If meant in the usual sense of the word, that is, referring to effort expended to obtain a mutually intended goal, the preceding discussion of phraseology would seem to preclude Becking's interpretation. YHWH and Cyrus are both at work, but Cyrus is unaware of, and therefore cannot share, YHWH's purpose, although his actions serve to achieve YHWH's aims.

Since Cyrus speaks in v. 2 without having been spoken to by YHWH, there may be some doubt concerning the accuracy or truthfulness of what he says. Whereas Jeremiah's word was explicitly said to be YHWH's, the use of *העיר את־דברוֹ* in Ezra 1:1 creates a less clear relationship between the word of Cyrus and YHWH. What is clear is that YHWH's purposes are about to be accomplished through what Cyrus will do, which includes the sending of the message in vv. 2-4. Jeremiah's word, whatever it was, was trustworthy because it was actually YHWH's. The events about to be recounted will fulfil that word because YHWH is orchestrating them. The sending of Cyrus's message is one of those events which will bring about the fulfilment of Jeremiah's word. So Cyrus's message does not have the status of the word of YHWH, but that in no way impairs its ability to fulfil YHWH's purpose.

Cyrus is again referred to as 'king of Persia', and the comments already made in connection with this phrase seem applicable to this instance of its usage as well.

The product of YHWH's action upon Cyrus is that Cyrus has a proclamation made throughout his kingdom (literally, 'he caused a voice to pass'). The reticent nature of the narrative gives the reader no indication of Cyrus's own experience of YHWH's action. He is viewed externally, simply the object of YHWH's stirring. His personal motivations and attitude toward YHWH remain completely hidden. As with Pul in 1 Chron 5:26 or the Philistines and Arabs in 2 Chron 21:16, there is no reason to suppose that Cyrus understands YHWH's larger purposes or is sympathetic towards them.

One may not merely assume that a character's point of view (in this case, Cyrus's) corresponds to that of the narrator. Biblical narratives frequently manifest a non-concurrence between the point of view of a character and the narrator's point of view.²⁹ Although the narrator clearly understands Cyrus's action as resulting from YHWH's influence, there is no indication that Cyrus recognises such influence.

The content of Cyrus's utterance is also put in writing. From a syntactical point of view, this is also represented as a result of YHWH's stirring. The voice did not pass in writing. Rather, an oral proclamation was supplemented by a written one. Therefore, the phrase is an elliptical clause, requiring the understanding of an appropriate finite verb.³⁰ Williamson refers to this phrase as a parenthetical afterthought, understanding that the oral nature of the proclamation is stressed (1985: 4). This is consistent with the previous observation that what is stressed at this point is that, rather than *saying* something to Cyrus, YHWH *prompted* Cyrus to do something. Williamson's description of the phrase as an afterthought, however, appears to be slightly overstated. Eskenazi gives examples³¹ in which דלל actually 'emphasizes the important detail which governs the narrative' (1988a: 43 n. 15). As the following narrative unfolds, the detail that the ordinance was put in writing will be of crucial importance (Gunneweg 1985: 42). The expression in Ezra 1:1, then, depicts the proclamation which Cyrus issued as something that was originally experienced by most as an oral event, but that – significantly, as it later turns out – was also put in writing.

Cyrus is portrayed as the passive object of YHWH's action. He is said to be inwardly stirred to carry out an act of communication, although it is not said that he receives any communication from YHWH. The communicative act that Cyrus performs serves YHWH's purpose, but since the reader is not given an indication that Cyrus is aware of that purpose, and since similar terminology is used elsewhere in

²⁹ The most common error readers of biblical narratives make is confusing a character's point of view with that of the narrator (Fewell and Gunn 1992: 1025). See the discussion of this phenomenon above, p. 49.

³⁰ Cf. NRSV, "and also in a written edict declared"; NASB, "and also [put it] in writing".

³¹ Gen. 14:16; 24:14, 19.

cases where an object of YHWH's stirring is clearly unaware of YHWH's purpose, it seems likely that Cyrus is also depicted as unaware of YHWH's purpose in this context. There are hints that the narrative has an ironic nature. An example may be perceived in the mention that the contents of the oral proclamation were also preserved in writing. On one level of narrative intention, this is recognisable as usual practice.³² On another, this detail becomes crucial in the unfolding of the plot and demonstrates that YHWH had purposes for the events that took place that Cyrus, as human agent, could not possibly have foreseen.

Verse 2a

The edict given in vv. 2-4 is often taken by scholars to be exclusively oral and a later version than that which appears at Ezra 6:3-5, which is held to be the only official written version that might have existed (Klein 1992: 732-33). The narrator does not draw a distinction between the two edicts and, in fact, seems to identify them as one, or as components of one 'command of Cyrus'. From the narrative perspective, they function similarly, although at each point in the narrative where they occur (chs. 1 and 6) different aspects are emphasised. This will, of course, be clearer after both passages have been discussed.

Williamson identifies the form of the decree in ch. 1 as a message in oral form (1985: 6). The identifying features he notes are the introduction by the messenger formula, a report in the perfect tense describing a new, present situation, and a concluding imperative section which offers a choice of decision to the addressee. He also mentions that there are other examples of this form in the HB, so the form would likely be well understood by the implied reader.

It is important to be clear about the fact that the 'messenger' in this instance is not Cyrus, but the 'voice' (קוֹל) which he caused to pass through the land, that is, the system of heralds who would have made the announcement (Blenkinsopp 1988: 75; Clines 1984: 35). When biblical prophets acted as messengers for YHWH, they

³² Cf. 2 Kgs. 19:9-14; 2 Chron 17:9; 30:1

identified YHWH as the author of the message. If the parallel is observed in this case, it is Cyrus who is the author of the message, not YHWH. In all other instances in which this formula is used in the HB with a subject other than the deity, it is clear that the speaker is not being represented as speaking on YHWH's behalf. In fact, this seems to be part of the rhetorical intent in Amos 7:11. In that passage, although Amos claimed to be speaking the word of YHWH, Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, prefaces his report of Amos's words with the phrase, 'thus says Amos'. Amaziah does *not* respect what Amos has said as a word from YHWH. Cyrus, therefore, is not likely rendered as speaking on YHWH's behalf.

The opening words of v. 2 are the 'conventional introductory phrase of the imperial style' (Clines 1984: 36, and the literature cited there), as evidenced, for example, in Darius's famous Behistun inscription.³³ The implied reader recognises this as the way powerful rulers typically begin their announcements. It may be noted that Cyrus is speaking in his own name. Although precisely what one would expect, it is also consistent with the interpretation expressed above that, from the narrator's perspective, Cyrus is not relaying a word from YHWH. He claims to be under orders from YHWH in his message, yet nowhere states how he came to be aware of those orders.

For the third time, Cyrus is called 'king of Persia', this time apparently by his own choice. As Bedford points out, there is no record of Cyrus referring to himself this way once he became ruler over Babylon (2001: 120-22), although Darius and Xerxes are on record as having used the title (Williamson 1985: 11). Whether he ever actually referred to himself in this way cannot, of course, be determined. The question at issue here, though, is not whether the narrator's usage is historically precise. Rather, it is how the implied reader of this text would understand it. Since he continued to be referred to by this title in the western part of his empire,³⁴ it is quite possible that a reader in ancient Palestine may not have detected anything unusual. It is certainly the case that by the time EN existed in its MT form, it was

³³ For a translation of the Behistun inscription, see Schmitt (1991).

³⁴ See on v. 1, p. 62.

customary to refer to Persian rulers with this title. In the present context, the consistency between the way he has been identified in v. 1 and the way he identifies himself here seems appropriate. If he were to refer to himself in a way different from that in which he was introduced, it would invite the reader to wonder why. The inclusion of a kingly title in the introductory phrase indicates the usual desire to be understood as speaking with regal authority. As king he has the power to command his addressees' attention (Davies 1999: 8).

The first thing Cyrus mentions after his opening formula is that 'all the kingdoms of the earth' have been given to him by YHWH the god of heaven. The sentence uses the active form of the verb *נָתַן* with 'YHWH' as subject and 'all the kingdoms of the earth' as object. But it varies from the usual verb-subject-object word order by placing the object, 'all the kingdoms of the earth', in the initial position. When choosing his own words, Cyrus highlights his position of vast authority and political power.³⁵

At this point it is enlightening to compare the text of EN with that found in the Cyrus Cylinder.³⁶ Unlike the latter, there is no opening statement in EN by the relevant god. Harmatta points out that the first part of the Cyrus Cylinder gives details about the conquest of Babylon from Marduk's point of view, followed by a narration from Cyrus's own point of view (1974: 29-30). In EN no statement by YHWH is given; Cyrus and YHWH do not speak together in the edict. Whereas the Cyrus Cylinder appears as a joint statement by Cyrus and Marduk, the narrative of EN quotes the proclamation of Cyrus as a discrete communication, included as one element of the story the narrator wishes to tell (cf. *ANET*, 316).

The language employed in *Cyrus's* statement in EN, however, is parallel to that found in the Cyrus Cylinder. In the extra-biblical text, Cyrus depicts himself as ruling 'the four corners of the earth'. In speaking of ruling the four corners of the earth, Cyrus is drawing on a long tradition. This idiom is attested as much as a thousand years before Cyrus's time and was part of the literary tradition of the

³⁵ Speeches by characters reveal how they wish to be seen. See above p. 42.

³⁶ The Cyrus cylinder is also dated to Cyrus's first year over Babylon.

ancient Near East (Willi 1995: 49). The similarity to the expression found in the proclamation in EN suggests a similarity of rhetorical aim between the two. The rhetorical aims of Cyrus evident in his proclamation affect his characterisation. It will be argued that the implied author understands the rhetorical intentions of decrees such as Ezra 1:2-4 and the Cyrus Cylinder, but does not portray a harmony between such aims and the intentions of YHWH.

It may be thought that much of what has been argued so far is overturned by the fact that Cyrus attributes his possession of all the kingdoms to his being given them by YHWH, especially since Israel embraced the view that the king functioned as the (or at least a) divine channel. In considering the narrative use of Cyrus's edict, however, it is important to keep in mind several of the factors discussed above.³⁷ The proclamation that Cyrus sends around contains what he wants others to hear and displays the picture of him that he wants the public to see. When the narrator places it before the reader's eyes, it must not be assumed that he shares the perspective of Cyrus, or adopts the perspective Cyrus wishes the public to adopt. There are potentially multiple points of view in operation. The implied reader will also bring certain expectations to this text, based on the associations he makes with ancient Near Eastern kings in general and, perhaps, Persian kings in particular. What Cyrus says in this proclamation will be compared with expected norms.

It is well to remember, then, that Cyrus's statement is 'hardly more than the conventional language of diplomacy' (McConville 1985: 7; similarly Williamson 1985: 12). In the first place, 'it was a commonplace of ancient Mesopotamian thought that kings were appointed by gods and were expected to be paragons of rulership' (Lambert 1998: 69; cf. Vanderhooft 1999: 40). Statements by kings to the effect that they were appointed to their rule by a god were not unusual. But further, Cyrus and other ancient Mesopotamian rulers characteristically affirmed that the deities of the *other* peoples over whom they ruled as *foreign* monarchs had given them their positions of power.³⁸ It was a way of seeking to reconcile the peoples'

³⁷ See pp. 33, 42, 42, 49.

³⁸ Cf. below p. 74.

worship of their own gods with acceptance of the rule of the particular king in question. It thus functioned to bolster the king's claim to rightful rule over the people. By no means, then, would his statement have identified Cyrus as a monotheistic Yahwist to the implied reader. At best, it could indicate his acceptance of the existence of YHWH as one of many gods. It could easily be construed as nothing more than political propaganda. Whether Cyrus was sincere in believing that YHWH had been instrumental in giving him the kingdoms of the earth or even that he existed is not revealed by the narrator. The use of conventional language, however, sets up conventional expectations.

One of the clearest extra-biblical examples of the practice mentioned above involves Cyrus himself. De Vaux notes that in the Cyrus Cylinder, Cyrus has himself proclaimed as the choice of Marduk for his Babylonian readership, but in a tablet from Nippur, he is specifically the choice of the goddess Sin (1972: 68-69). It appears that he depicted himself as the appointee of whichever god would be most relevant to his particular audience. The idea that Cyrus had been chosen by the gods was widespread among the Medes, Babylonians and Persians, and Cyrus appears to have wanted to promote it (Harmatta 1974: 40). Since this was a common practice among ancient Near Eastern rulers, it seems unlikely that their subjects would have remained unaware of it.

In his discussion of the parallel passage in 2 Chron. 36:23, Ben Zvi opines that Cyrus is portrayed as having a worldview consistent with that of Hezekiah in 2 Kgs. 19:15 (1999: 223). The question turns on whether the implied reader of Chronicles recognises the conventional language of diplomacy or is naively swayed by it. In the narrative of 2 Kings, the reader is given good grounds to suppose that Hezekiah's statements about YHWH's sovereignty over the whole earth are sincere. The narrator portrays him as a devoted Yahwist. In the absence of such a characterisation for Cyrus, however, the use of such language by a king with respect to the god of one of his subject peoples is likely to appear to the reader as merely conventional diplomacy. Cyrus and Hezekiah appear to the implied reader to have quite different worldviews.

It is also worth noticing that YHWH's name does not appear in the version of the edict given in Ezra 6. This difference is consistent with the idea that the version in ch. 1 was the sort of proclamation intended to influence the hearers by rhetorical use of the name of their god, similar to what is found in other Cyrus texts. Since the version in ch. 6 was a written memorandum deposited in the archives, there was no need for rhetorical flourish. The implied reader, then, perceives irony in ch. 1. The conventional reference to the relevant deity is recognisable, but the narrator clearly believes that it really *is* YHWH who has given these kingdoms to Cyrus. The irony created in the narrative, though subtle, is palpable.

Other ways of understanding the narrator's use of the edict have been suggested. Bedford thinks that Cyrus is here portrayed as issuing the edict in recognition of YHWH giving him victory over Babylon (2001: 89). The text does not mention Babylon or any military conquests. It is entirely unspecific about how Cyrus came to be ruler over such a vast empire. Of course, in an ancient text such as this, the fact that victorious battles lie behind the attainment of an empire may be taken for granted, and the implied reader either knows or soon comes to learn that it is particularly Cyrus's rule over Babylonia that is in view in this narrative. But the possible motives for his issuance of this decree are left undefined. Sincere gratitude, polite acknowledgement of a subject people's deity, and the rhetorical assertion of his own kingship all remain live options, likely in order of increasing probability. Since Cyrus and others attributed their victories to different gods depending on whom they were addressing (van der Spek 1982: 279), the reader likely recognises this as a statement intended to have a particular rhetorical effect on the Judean exiles. Therefore, the narrator's use of Cyrus's words has a different intent than that of Cyrus himself.

Even if it be accepted that Cyrus was sincerely grateful to YHWH for his circumstances in some measure, the narrator has placed a limit on how far that gratitude may be understood to extend. Apart from his role in initiating rebuilding of

the Jerusalem temple, Cyrus does not carry out any specific acts of worship in EN.³⁹ His reference to YHWH's people in v. 3 does not include himself among them. He undertakes to build a temple for YHWH, but that action is also fraught with political implications, as will be seen below. Thus, the evidence of his recognition of YHWH remains limited in the eyes of the implied reader. Moreover, it was also the case that Achaemenid kings sometimes later destroyed temples they had previously restored (Kuhrt 1995: 699). In the ancient Near Eastern milieu, the restoration of a particular temple was no guarantee of a favourable attitude in future toward practitioners of the corresponding cult.

Bedford thinks the Gadatas inscription may represent a parallel historical situation that could explain Cyrus's behaviour (2001: 148-49). It refers to the favourable treatment given by Darius to Gadatas because members of the cult of Apollo had been supportive of him. Bedford suggests that Cyrus may have treated the Judean exiles favourably because they were supportive of him, based on Jeremiah 50-51 and Isaiah 40-55.

In response it must be pointed out that the narrator of EN does not give any indication that Cyrus was motivated by a supportive attitude. Though this may provide a plausible historical scenario, it is not part of the narrative portrayal, unlike the explicit connection made in the Gadatas inscription. As when comparing the text of EN to that of the Cyrus Cylinder, it is important to note the literary differences as much as the similarities. When trying to discover the unstated implications in an ancient text by recourse to texts of the same period, it is important to look for those that are the most similar. Of course, even if the implied reader does infer that Cyrus means to show a favour to Judeans who have supported him in his conquest of Babylon, the narrator still achieves irony, because it is YHWH who stands behind all of this, stirring up Cyrus, unbeknown to him.

Others have suggested that Cyrus's proclamation was in response to a specific request by Judean exiles living in Babylon. For example, Williamson draws

³⁹ This may be contrasted with the direct role played by Israelite kings in texts such as 2 Sam. 6:13, 17-18; 24:25; 1 Kgs. 3:4, 15; 8:5, 62-64; 9:25.

particular attention to the request of the Elephantine Jewish community, recorded in *AP* 30, for permission to rebuild their temple, and also to the Xanthos trilingual inscription, responding to a request to establish and maintain a new cult (1985: 11). He believes that such a request could explain the Jewish terminology present in Cyrus's proclamation. Of course, it is unlikely that Cyrus would have undertaken any of his actions toward restoring the cults of subject peoples without some degree of familiarity with the relevant circumstances and practices, which presupposes at least some interaction with the relevant people. Yet, there is no indication in *EN* that the Judeans made such a request. None of the three places in which Cyrus's command is referred to (chs. 1, 5 and 6) makes such an association. This may be contrasted with *Ezra* 7 and *Nehemiah* 2, where a Persian king explicitly acts in response to a Judean request.

A clearer parallel to *Ezra* 1:2a is found in an inscription of Cyrus from Ur. In this case, Cyrus's assertion that he ruled by will of the gods seems to be more an argument for recognition of his authority than an expression of gratitude for past support. Bedford would argue that this parallel is not particularly relevant because Babylonian cults were more important to the Achaemenids than those on the periphery of their empire (2001: 137-57). The concern in this discussion, however, is to identify instances of parallel language and discern how that language was used and interpreted – in other words, what it meant – quite apart from judgments by modern scholars about the plausibility that it would have been used in a given historical situation. The Ur inscription, then, may not provide a plausible parallel historical scenario in Bedford's judgment, but the literary parallel it provides suggests that the narrator of *EN* was claiming that the situations should be understood as parallel. Cyrus appears to be claiming that the Judeans should recognise the legitimacy of his authority over them as of divine origin.

If Cyrus is understood by the implied reader to have read *Isaiah*, as suggested by Josephus, this still does not remove the irony from the narrative. Bedford says, 'Verses 2-4 are ostensibly an edict of Cyrus II issued soon after his coming to power in Babylon as a result of his recognition that the God of Israel was responsible for his victory (cf. *Is* 41:1-7; 44:28; 45:1-6)' (2001: 89). His interpretation is that the

implied reader understands Cyrus to have read the Isaiah prophecies. But even if he acknowledged YHWH in this regard, there is nothing especially noteworthy about it, since this was common for conquerors to do. It would not set Cyrus apart from other foreign rulers in the mind of the implied reader. As Bedford points out elsewhere, Isaiah's program was to make other nations subject to Israel as they were subject to Israel's god (2001: 82; cf. Isa. 60:12), so even if Cyrus took a step in the 'right' direction, he didn't go far enough. He could still seek to use the prophetic text as propaganda, and the implied reader would recognise that possibility. It is not the case that Cyrus would simply be understood to have accepted YHWH's intentions and adopted them as his own.

On the other hand, even if Cyrus does not understand YHWH's intentions the way the narrator does, as a typical ancient Near Eastern ruler it would still be normal for him to have an interest in doing service to the gods of his subjects (cf. Allen 2005: 125). On this interpretation Cyrus, without any actual communication from YHWH, is attempting to fulfil the responsibilities he imagines himself to have, based on the political-theological customs of his day.

Doubtless in this task Cyrus saw himself in typically Achaemenid fashion, as the representative and thus the 'servant' of Yahweh. There is fidelity to the biblical tradition in the manner in which the decree is reported in both Chronicles and Ezra and irony as well. Cyrus acts but Yahweh impels him (Ezra 1:1) (Dumbrell 1986: 65-66).

While Cyrus attempts to score political points with his rhetoric, he keeps his religious fingers crossed as well, hoping that the god, YHWH in this case, will look favourably upon him for his service. Such perspectives may not readily spring to the minds of modern readers, but they were the standard concerns of rulers in the time when EN was written. It is important to remember that polytheism was the norm rather than the exception. In the literature of the HB, we see it expressed in the history of Israel, from the Pentateuch through Samuel and Kings and Chronicles, and in the practices of other nations where these are alluded to. But this combination of political and religious concerns still differs from the agenda of the narrator.

Cyrus's language in this half-verse matches the typical bureaucratic style of his day and emphasises his political power while attempting to invite an agreeable response from his addressees. Although his rhetoric is perceptible in the proclamation, there is no support for Cyrus's ideology in the narrator's words. The lack of any narrative indication that the proclamation should be read in other than a stereotypical way makes it unlikely that the implied reader views Cyrus as committed to the worship of YHWH in any meaningful way. Thus, Cyrus is depicted as seeking to present himself as a ruler to which the Judean exiles should be loyal, but the narrator gives no hint that he concurs with Cyrus.

Scholars debate whether Cyrus would have used the name יהוה אלהי השמים (Bedford 2001: 122-28). In a literary reading of EN, the important question is what the significance of this usage would have been for the implied reader. The use of 'YHWH' by Cyrus would not have seemed unusual. Achaemenid rulers consistently used the names of the gods of the local population (Williamson 1985: 11). Certainly by the time EN was written, the implied reader was used to this practice. The use of 'the god of heaven' would also not have seemed unusual. It is attested in other biblical texts at points of official contact between Jews and their overlords in the Babylonian and Persian periods as well as in the Aramaic papyri.⁴⁰ Holmgren suggests that Jews and Persians were able to affirm each other by the use of this phrase while filling this title with meaning that was peculiar to their own beliefs (1987: 9). It is unlikely that the Judeans naively assumed that Persians held the same view of 'the god of heaven' as the Judeans themselves did simply because they used the same terminology.

It was also the case that the particular *nomina divina* employed in address played an important role in determining how the sender wished the message to be perceived by the recipient (Bolin 1995: 135-36). This supports the interpretation already advanced that Cyrus has composed his message in diplomatic style, with a view to its favourable reception by the Judeans. For the implied reader, then, Cyrus's use of this terminology fits with the overall impression that he acts on the basis of

⁴⁰ AP 30:2, 15, 27-28.

standard ancient Near Eastern ideology. The natural conclusion is that Cyrus's view is different from that of the narrator.

Another question that has occupied scholars is whether the use of 'the god of heaven' indicates that Cyrus identifies YHWH with Ahura Mazda (Bedford 2001: 126-28). Holmgren suggests that Cyrus may have thought that YHWH and Marduk were local representations of his own god (1987: 8). However, the issue of Cyrus's religious beliefs, including whether he actually was a worshipper of Ahura Mazda, continues to be debated (Bedford 2001: 123-24). It would be precarious, therefore, to conclude that Cyrus equated YHWH with Ahura Mazda. More pertinent for this study, however, is whether the implied reader of EN would detect such an equation on Cyrus's part. The Judean exiles were evidently quite comfortable with the phrase 'the god of heaven', even when not engaging foreigners in dialogue (cf. especially Neh. 1:4; 2:4). To them it meant YHWH. The implied reader, therefore, likely understands Cyrus simply to be referring to the Judean god by the standard nomenclature. Whatever level of understanding of YHWH Cyrus may have had (in the implied reader's eyes), it is apparent from the context of Ezra 1 that he is depicted as referring to the god of the Judeans.

The safest conclusion is that Cyrus is represented in the narrative as making a political statement about his authority to rule in terms tailored for a Judean audience. His statement fits what appears to be a well-established rhetorical pattern familiar to Near Eastern readers throughout antiquity. Allen grants that Cyrus's permission for the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild (vv. 3-4) was a public relations move (2005: 28). Thus, his rhetoric at this point in the proclamation is preparatory. In line with the inherent connection between politics and religion in that time, Cyrus is likely also understood by the implied reader to wish to gain any favour that he can with the local Judean deity. This would be seen to issue from a standard polytheistic perspective on Cyrus's part. The implied author is not a polytheist, however. His understanding of events is that the one god YHWH stirred Cyrus to act out of his polytheistic perspective in such a way that he actually accomplished YHWH's purposes. In this way the narrative is ironic.

Verse 2b

With this clause Cyrus explains the reason for the instructions that will follow. Having affirmed that YHWH has favoured him with all the kingdoms of the earth, he goes on to reveal that the privileged duty of temple construction has been given to him as well.

The passages in Nebuchadnezzar's inscriptions describing his call to rulership by the gods—usually following the titulary . . . revolve around two ancient ideas about the role of the king, as do those of Nabopolassar. First, the gods call the king to rule over certain people and territories. Second, they commission him to renew temples or cities (Vanderhooft 1999: 34-35).

The specific act of temple-building was a symbolic statement of a king's divine right to rule in the ancient Near East (Kapelrud 1963: 56-62). This ideology was so widespread and so well known that it is likely that the implied author of EN means for the implied reader to understand Cyrus's intentions in this way.⁴¹ It does not follow that the narrator accepts Cyrus's ideology any more than the biblical narrators accepted the ideologies of Sennacherib or Nebuchadnezzar, which they also reported.

After all, the writers and audiences of these Old Testament/Hebrew Bible texts were influenced not only by biblical texts in the making and traditions relating to them, but also by a well-ingrained imperial tradition and its ideological or theological grammar, in its Achaemenid version (Ben Zvi 1995: 148).

Attempts by kings to placate their new subjects by protesting their piety seems to have been a well-known ploy in the ancient world. Alexander also promised to restore shrines in Babylon when his power extended to the area (Allen 2005: 186 n. 39), indicating that the practice continued well past the period referred to in EN.

Another ideological factor operative in the ancient world was the notion of historical recurrence. Although this is often associated with the cultic re-enactment of annual rites and a cyclical view of history, this was not the only form it took. In

⁴¹ In connection with temple-building, Hurowitz writes that the inscription of Antiochus Soter (*ANET*, p. 317), dated 280-262, still contains echoes of classic Mesopotamian traditions and language (1992: 26 n. 1). Thus, these traditions were current over a long period of time stretching from well before until after the time when EN was written.

many cases, the concern seems to have been rather to restore an earlier state of affairs considered 'normal' (Trompf 1979: 213-29). The restoration of cultic practices by various rulers may well have been motivated at least in part by such desires.

This sustains the irony between the viewpoints of the narrator and Cyrus. The urgency for Cyrus is to proceed with significant cultic projects, firmly establishing himself as ruler over his subjects. For the narrator, YHWH has brought Cyrus to power in order to have his temple rebuilt as part of the restoration of his people from exile. While these two ways of looking at the matter were not mutually exclusive in the ancient mind, the difference of emphasis is clear.

The multivalent verb **פָּקַד** is here probably best translated 'lay upon' (as a charge) (Williamson 1985: 4). The choice of this verb fits nicely into the interpretation developed here. It is consistent with ancient Near Eastern conceptions about royal responsibilities for temple-building. But it also preserves the possibility that there has been no actual communication between Cyrus and YHWH. Cyrus merely states that he has the responsibility, without explaining how he became aware of it. To see this more clearly, it is helpful to review the relationship of the narrative frame to the proclamation of Cyrus itself. In the narrative frame, YHWH is said to stir Cyrus to action, not to give him a message or lay a charge upon him. The narrator does not use a messenger formula. Cyrus himself claims to have been given a task, not to have received a message. There is no precise correspondence between the narrator's verb and the verb Cyrus uses. Thus, YHWH prompts the speech but does not author it.

The idea of YHWH laying a charge upon Cyrus also creates a parallel with Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonian king is also implied to have 'served' YHWH,⁴² and his service appears to have been unawares. Just as Nebuchadnezzar could be seen by YHWH and the biblical narrator as a servant, while Nebuchadnezzar himself remained ignorant of YHWH's true purposes, so Cyrus can be seen similarly in Ezra 1.

⁴² Jer. 25:9; 27:6.

The only responsibility Cyrus claims to have is to build a house for YHWH. There is no indication that he intends to provide ongoing support for the Jerusalem temple or for the returned Judean exiles. His action is self-contained. Some scholars have seen in his temple-building initiative an invitation to connect Cyrus with Solomon. It is suitably ironic, however, that elsewhere throughout EN it is the Judean people who are said to build the house, rather than Cyrus or any Persian king.⁴³ This is in contrast to the narrative of Solomon, who is consistently the subject of the verb בנה in connection with the first temple in Kings and Chronicles.⁴⁴ The possible points of comparison between Cyrus (and other Persian kings) and Solomon in EN tend to be rather obvious. In attempting to perceive the portrayal of these kings in EN, however, it is also important to notice the contrasts. Features bearing on the question of the relationship between these characters will be noted throughout the discussion, and a synthesis will be attempted in the conclusion.

It may be objected that, from a narrative critical standpoint, the fact that the historical background referred to above concerning the political and ideological significance of temple construction is not made explicit in EN constitutes a serious problem. After all, it is not 'in the text'. It must be noted, however, that the same information is not made any more explicit in 2 Samuel, where it also seems to be presupposed by the implied author (Lundquist 1982; 1984). Moreover, the implied author of the so-called Deuteronomistic History modifies the standard Near Eastern ideology. The existence of the temple does not automatically place the divine stamp of approval on the monarchy. Numerous kings of Judah are said to rule in a manner completely at odds with YHWH's intentions. How much more was this ideology modified by the exile. In the first place, in the Persian period, the dwelling places of YHWH and king were no longer physically adjacent to each other. But further, and more important, the writer of EN believes that YHWH remained sovereign over creation despite the fact that the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. In fact, the destruction is seen as confirmation of YHWH's sovereignty (Ezra 5:12). There is

⁴³ Ezra 3:10; 4:1; 5:2, 8, 11, etc.

⁴⁴ 1 Kgs. 6:2, 14; 9:10; 1 Chron. 5:36; 6:17; 2 Chron. 8:1; 35:3.

reason to believe, then, that the implied author of EN is aware of the ideological background attending royal temple construction in his time, and, like the implied author of the pre-exilic history, took for granted that his readers were familiar with it, and was quite willing to subvert it to some extent. Thus, although Cyrus almost certainly was an adherent of the standard Near Eastern ideology, the narrator and implied reader of EN, although aware of it, just as certainly were not.

Other motives have also been suggested for Cyrus's temple-building in Judah. Weinberg argued that it was part of preparations for an intended attack on Egypt (1992: 110). Since this would require knowledge of a specific historical event, rather than of a long-standing and prevalent ideology, and such an event is not mentioned in the text, it is hard to know whether the implied reader is expected to make such a connection. Another possible motive that may have been well known to ancient readers is suggested by Schaper (1995). He notes that the Persians took over from the neo-Babylonians the practice of collecting temple taxes (528-29). He argues that this practice was followed in many parts of the Persian empire, including Judah, and that the Persian religious tolerance was 'a highly successful political and economic strategy which was only partly caused by genuinely religious motives' (535).

Ultimately it is not critical to determine what Cyrus's precise motives may have been for issuing such a proclamation, nor even whether it was worded precisely as it appears in Ezra 1:2-4.⁴⁵ What is clear is that the implied reader would interpret some form of political expediency as the driving force behind Cyrus's words. Bedford argues that the Achaemenids had no established policy of helping the indigenous cults of subject peoples (2001: 132ff.). Although that may well be true, it is clear that EN is set in a historical period in which instances of such aid were known, if not part of an actual policy. The reader would not find his decree as surprising as it often has seemed to modern interpreters. The only element that might be found unusual would be that an entity as insignificant as Judah should be the recipient of such favour, which would highlight YHWH's activity even further.

⁴⁵ The conventions of ancient literature clearly allowed for modifications to speeches in their textual reproduction, see above, p. 41.

It must be questioned, therefore, how supportive such an act on Cyrus's part would have been perceived to be by the implied reader. It has frequently been maintained that the portrayal of Cyrus in EN is as a model of 'what a foreign ruler should be like' (e.g. Coggins 1998: 87). In light of the discussion to this point, however, such a reading seems to have less to commend it than many have assumed. Instead, a reading of Cyrus's role as ironic seems better supported by the evidence. The following examples illustrate the plausibility of such a reading.

Cyrus's motivation in restoring Israelite worship may be compared to that of the king of Assyria in 2 Kgs. 17:24-41. The narrator there reports the king's attempt to reinstate the worship of YHWH in Samaria, even going so far as to send back a Samarian priest in order to provide instruction. Yet it is clear that the implied author and implied reader do not share the perspective of the king of Assyria. It may be added that by the time EN was written, ancient readers had already been used to the ideologically motivated statements of Assyrian (Cogan 1993: 406) and Babylonian (and possibly even Persian) rulers for centuries.

Another biblical example deserving consideration is the episode of Sennacherib's invasion in 2 Kings 18-19. In 18:25 Sennacherib claims to have come up against the land of Judah at YHWH's behest, and in 19:25-26 YHWH affirms that he has been the power behind Sennacherib's might. In this case the reader understands that Sennacherib has carried out YHWH's will, and has even said as much, but his intentions have been unacceptable from YHWH's perspective, as 19:27-28 establishes. The narrator's perspective corresponds to YHWH's, not to Sennacherib's.

Fales has argued that the Elephantine correspondence, which must be judged as nearly contemporary with EN, reflects the notion that events may be understood on both the divine and human planes simultaneously (1987: 467-68). This is seen in *AP* 30. The Elephantine priests tell that they prayed to Yahu concerning their enemy Widrang and interpret the events that have befallen him at the hands of others as an answer to their prayer.

Surveying more widely still, the comment of Richards may be considered: The libraries of Greece contained books of authors from approximately the same time as Ezra and Nehemiah, i.e., Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides, Aristotle, and Demosthenes . . . Interpreters of

Chronos and EN will be well served by remembering that the context for understanding this literature is not merely the deuteronomistic historian or genealogies in Genesis (1995: 218-19).

The perception of irony in Ezra 1 certainly requires no more literary sophistication on the part of author and reader than that found in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.

These examples show that the distinction between the divine and human perspectives was recognised by readers before and during the time when EN was written. Such a distinction in Ezra 1 produces irony. Thus, although Cyrus's speech accurately reflects YHWH's will, that is ironic. For Cyrus, reconstruction of the temple was a means to secure his kingship. For the narrator, Cyrus's kingship was a means to secure the reconstruction of the temple. The balance of EN does not provide any evidence that the implied author understands Cyrus's claim to sovereignty over Judah as enhanced in any way. The royal ideology likely inherent in Cyrus's actions is not endorsed by the narrator. As stated above, if anything, the Near Eastern royal ideology appears to be subverted.

Thus, Cyrus does not appear in the narrative as a 'model' foreign monarch, but rather as a typical foreign monarch. As others are elsewhere, he is used by YHWH to achieve his purposes concerning Israel. Sometimes YHWH's intention is to bless them, sometimes to punish them. Therefore, the implied reader would not assume on the basis of Ezra 1:2-4 that the exiled Judeans would be or become the objects of the ongoing favour of Cyrus.

The irony present in the narration of events in the opening verses of EN has been perceived by others. What is interesting is that the source of the irony is usually seen to be the modern scholar's understanding of history contrasted with the discourse of the narrative. In other words, the perspectives of the narrator and Cyrus are often taken to coincide. It is only the modern scholar who, conversant with Persian history, recognises that Cyrus likely had motives somewhat different from those professed on the surface. For example, Allen writes, 'the narrator, perhaps unwittingly, captures the flavour of early Persian policy in attributing Cyrus' military successes to the Lord or Yahweh, the God of Israel' (2003a: 16). Further on, Allen seems to allow that the narrator recognised the irony when he writes, 'The ironic truth is that the God of Israel, and this God alone, was the real power behind the Persian

throne and Cyrus' Judean policy, and verse 1 has already used an argument from prophecy to support this claim' (2003a: 17). It is not completely clear whether he recognises that the implied author intends for the implied reader to notice the irony in the narrative. What is argued in this study is that the irony is not merely recognisable to a student of history. That is, the narrative does not 'happen' to be ironic. Rather, it was intended by the implied author to be understood in this way, and this would not be missed by the implied reader.

One factor that has been very influential in critics' understanding of this passage has been the recognition that in ancient times it was believed that only kings could undertake the building of a temple (Kapelrud 1963). The conclusion has been drawn that Cyrus plays the crucial role of temple builder in EN, and that therefore the narrator understands him to be intentionally obedient to YHWH.

The necessity of a king for temple-building must be viewed from two perspectives. Many apparently believed that only kings could build legitimate temples. It is not clear whether the narrator of EN believes this, since he relates the actual rebuilding as though it is the returned exiles who build it, not the king.⁴⁶ On the other hand, it is clear that no previously destroyed temple could be reconstructed without royal approval, since the regime in power simply would not allow it. This had nothing to do with ideology about the legitimacy of the temple in the eyes of those who would worship there and everything to do with political realities. Confusion on this point is apparent in many treatments of the narrative: e.g. Bedford, 'Ezr 1:1-4:5, which supports temple rebuilding, does not deal with the issue of the ideology legitimating the undertaking. It appears that this narrative relies on the kingship of Cyrus to legitimate the rebuilding (Ezr 1:1-4; cf. 5:1-6:15 relying also on Darius)' (2001: 279).

In EN, Cyrus provides the necessary royal approval to allow the Judean exiles to return to Jerusalem and begin rebuilding the temple. His edict later sustains the momentum of the project at a crucial juncture (Ezra 6). The narrator sees this as enabling the overcoming of obstacles on the pragmatic level. For the narrator,

⁴⁶ As will be seen in what follows.

Cyrus's approval does not make the temple legitimate in a religious sense; this is guaranteed by adherence to the instructions of Moses and David (e.g., Ezra 3:2, 10). Ezra 1:2 may no more be seen as evidence of Israelite acquiescence to Persian rule than Moses' request that Pharaoh allow the Israelites to leave Egypt may be seen as acquiescence to Egyptian rule.

Verse 3

In v. 3 Cyrus narrows the range of those who are to participate in the rebuilding. Verse 1 provided the setting in which this proclamation was made, namely, Cyrus's entire kingdom. Thus, although the message would clearly have been of greatest interest to the Judeans who heard it, the second person plural pronoun in בָּנִים refers to all the people in the Persian Empire (Allen 2003a: 16).

Those who are to participate in the rebuilding are a subset of the people in Cyrus's kingdom, namely, those who are 'YHWH's people'. Referring to a people as belonging to a specific deity was common throughout the ancient Near East (e.g., in the Cyrus Cylinder, Marduk is described as 'a protector of his people') (Williamson 1985: 13). 'YHWH's people' are 'among' the others in the empire. The events narrated in this book are set in the midst of a specific historical reality. That reality was the absorption of the Syro-Palestinian states into the provincial system of first Assyria and then Babylonia. This took place over a period extending roughly from the early ninth to the early sixth centuries, with Babylonia inheriting and to some extent expanding the Assyrian empire after conquering it. States which had previously existed autonomously and had been ruled by native kings became subject to the 'great kings' of Assyria and Babylonia. Although politically and governmentally integrated into these vast empires, most of these states maintained a historical consciousness of their ethnic distinctiveness (Miller and Hayes 1986: 314-76; Ahlström 1993: 781-803). For some of these peoples, the appreciation of ethnic identity was accompanied by awareness that their ancestors had been geographically displaced by exile. Accordingly, they saw themselves as aliens in their land of residence, and, even among those born in the land to which their parents had been deported, some longed to 'return' to a land they had never lived in. Complicating this

state of affairs was the fact that, during the period of Assyrian domination, some of the exiled peoples had been replaced in what had been 'their' land by peoples from other parts of the empire (Oded 1979). This appears to have been the experience of some of those who had been exiled from Judah to Babylon and their descendants. It is this background which renders the atmosphere of the narrative intelligible.

One of the rhetorical effects of Cyrus's wording is to separate him from the 'people of YHWH'. He is not portrayed as one of them. When the reader comes to Nehemiah 9, with its dichotomy between 'our kings' and the 'kings YHWH has set over us' it is clear in which category Cyrus belongs.

The words 'may his god be with him' contribute to the depiction of Cyrus already suggested. In the first place, they are traditional bureaucratic language (Grabbe 1992: I, 34). This agrees with a reading of the proclamation as a matter of political business expressed in religious terms more than as an expression of sincere religious interests. Second, they sound more like they come from a pagan than from a worshipper of YHWH. Clines points out that '[o]rdinarily this would mean that the people's god's image would go with them' (1984: 38). Coming from Cyrus this is probably the flavour the reader discerns. The version of this edict in the parallel passage in 2 Chronicles (36:23) has the name of YHWH in place of the jussive of הִיהֵא. Williamson suggests that it may be precisely the pagan sense attaching to this expression that has caused the editor of Chronicles to make the phrase 'more palatable to his readers' (1985: 4). As with עֲמֹךְ in the previous phrase, this terminology serves to put distance between Cyrus and YHWH. Cyrus, then, is understood essentially to be wishing the returnees good success from their god, which is understandable, since he has initiated the undertaking.

In the course of the narrative, however, YHWH *is* said to be with his people. As a result, they are successful in rebuilding the temple (cf. Karrer 2001: 330). What was likely a standard wish for general success is literally fulfilled. Both Cyrus's edict and the realisation of his specific wish are part of YHWH's purpose. This is ironic.

Finally, it should also be noted that the use of this phrase creates a parallel between the returned exiles and Solomon (or Joshua). The phrase עֲמֹךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ

occurs in a number of passages with reference to the installations of Joshua and Solomon to their respective roles (Dillard 1981: 293).⁴⁷ In Solomon's case, it is particularly connected with his role as temple builder. The idea that the people serve as temple-builders is sustained throughout EN. In this respect, they displace Cyrus from the usual kingly role. Eskenazi sees v. 3 as a delegation of the building task by Cyrus to God's people (1988a: 43). It is unlikely that the text would have been understood that way in ancient times. Cyrus uses the standard language to enlist the Judeans in *his* project of rebuilding the temple to their god. To use Solomon as an example again, the writer of Chronicles styles him as the builder of the first temple, even though it is clear that others performed the actual labour. What would have been particularly significant to the ancient implied reader of EN is how the narrator goes on to *portray* the rebuilding as the work of the people and not the king in the ensuing chapters.

At this point Cyrus gives the specific instruction to travel to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. The jussive verbs *ויעל* and *ויבן* are seen by some commentators as lending a permissive rather than imperative tone to the edict (Williamson 1985: 4; cf. NRSV). Whatever judgment may be made about this, it is clear that Cyrus envisions that his plan will be executed. It should probably be interpreted in such a way that allows for some of the Judeans not to return home. We should note that clearly not all did, since Ezra 7-8 and Nehemiah 2 report subsequent migrations from Babylon and Persia to Judea. Also, on the several occasions when this command is referred to again in EN, mention is only made of Cyrus's wish to rebuild the temple, with no mention that he instructed a return of exiles. It should also be noted that in Ezra 4:3 the returned exiles themselves seem to perceive Cyrus's edict as a command. But the command is for them to build the temple, not to return to Judea from exile. In terms of the narrative, what is significant for the development of the plot is that Cyrus has given the necessary royal permission for the return to Jerusalem and rebuilding activity to begin.

⁴⁷ Deut. 31:6, 8, 23; Josh. 1:5, 9; 1 Chron. 22:11, 16; 28:20; 2 Chron. 1:1.

With the phrase 'go up', another instance of ironic double meaning is encountered. For Cyrus, the phrase may have had the meaning 'go up country', that is, go north (Driver 1957: 74-77; Clines 1984: 38). In that case, it would not have had the associations for Cyrus that it would for the reader of EN, namely, to go up to the temple at Jerusalem.⁴⁸ The irony would very likely be intended by the narrator and recognised by the implied reader.

Contributing further to the sense of irony experienced later in the narrative is the fact that Cyrus says nothing in the edict about repatriation as such. Those who see Cyrus portrayed as liberator of the Judeans in EN seem to overlook this fact. A second jussive in sequence, as here, often expresses the purpose of the first (Waltke and O'Connor 1990: 577). Travel to Jerusalem is only for purposes of working on the reconstruction of the temple (cf. Bach 1993: 60; Karrer 2001: 332). It is not clear that Cyrus foresaw any large-scale resettlement in Judah. But the narrator makes it clear from Ezra 2 on that that is indeed what happened, so this, too, may be an ironic development. The narrator brings into view the circumstance that permission for returning to the land of Judah was granted by way of the command to build the temple. What Cyrus envisioned and what subsequently took place seem to diverge.

When Cyrus refers to 'YHWH god of Israel', it is consistent with the line of interpretation developed above. It reinforces the opposition already established between himself as 'king of Persia' and YHWH as 'god of Israel' (cf. Grabbe 1998: 11). It is also consistent with the pattern outlined above in which ancient Near Eastern kings recognised the gods of various peoples.⁴⁹

It has been questioned what the name 'Israel' would refer to coming from Cyrus, since it would seem to have had neither ethnic nor geographical (and certainly not political) referent at that point in history. The first place to seek the answer is within the context of EN itself. The narrator uses the name in several places to refer to the returned exiles (Ezra 6:16, 17, 21; 8:35; 9:1, 15). Given the conventions of quotation in ancient times, it is likely that Cyrus is portrayed as referring to what the

⁴⁸ Cf. 1 Kgs. 12:28; 2 Kgs. 23:9; Ps. 122: 4; Isa. 2:3; Zech. 14:17.

⁴⁹ See above, p. 70.

narrator means when he uses the term, regardless of what term Cyrus may actually have used.⁵⁰ Since the narrator uses it relatively freely, it is unlikely that the implied reader would think it strange that Cyrus used it. Cyrus's dealings with the Judean exiles were probably relatively few in number. There likely was no established terminology for such occasions. It is even possible that Cyrus may have used the name because the exiles used it of themselves. It is unlikely that the narrator's use of it introduces a novelty, or raised the implied reader's eyebrows, as it has for modern scholars.

Verse 4

The use of נִשְׁאֵר in v. 4 has occasioned much comment. There seem to be three main views regarding its meaning and reference. (1) It means 'survivors' and refers to Judeans who were not killed at the time of the Babylonian deportation nor since. The theological connotation is 'remnant'. In the context of the proclamation, it has in view those Judeans who will go up to Jerusalem. They are to be supported by gifts from their neighbours, either Judeans or non-Judeans (Mosis 1973: 210 n. 7; Gunneweg 1985: 43-44; Blenkinsopp 1988: 76). (2) It means 'the rest' and refers to the Judeans who will not be returning to Jerusalem. They are then understood to provide support for those who do return (Bickerman 1946: 258-60; Williamson 1985: 14; cf. NJPS). (3) It means 'the rest' and refers to any Judean who would be left behind were it not for support mandated in the proclamation. As it is, the men of his place (i.e. the neighbours of the one who could not otherwise go) are to provide support so that he can make the journey (Galling 1964: 75-76).

It has been argued, of course, that Cyrus would be unlikely to use the term with the technical meaning of 'survivor'. For many scholars the effect of the appearance of the word is to increase the likelihood that the narrator has fabricated this statement, or even the entire proclamation.

⁵⁰ Cf. above, p. 41.

The ordinary meaning of the term is simply 'rest' or 'remainder'. In the context of the proclamation, it is most natural to understand the term to refer to those who are not encouraged to go up, that is, non-Judeans. The subject of the jussives in v. 3 is the Judean (whoever is one of YHWH's people), and the subject of v. 4, then, is the non-Judean. The personal pronoun אִנִּי in the relative clause of v. 4 could refer back to the Judean in v. 3. The pronominal suffix on the finite verb of v. 4 could also refer back to the Judean in v. 3. This imperfect verb should probably be understood as a jussive, similar to those in v. 3. The 'rest' could then be seen as synonymous with 'the men of his place'. Verses 3 and 4, then, would give the instructions for two groups of people, Judeans and non-Judeans. The Judeans are to go up to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, and the non-Judeans are to support their Judean neighbours with material goods. Admittedly, this construal of the syntax is complicated, but that is true of any interpretation of the verse (cf. Williamson 1983: 9-11; 1985: 5).

The complicated syntax fits the narrator's purpose, however, since it admits of a double meaning. It is possible to read נִשְׁאָר as 'survivor', with its attendant theological implications (meaning [1] above). This is how the term is used in its three other occurrences in EN, by Ezra, Nehemiah, and Hanani. In that case the 'men of his place' would not be synonymous with 'survivor', but would refer to the survivors' neighbours. The pronominal suffix on the finite verb would refer back to 'survivor', which in turn would be identified with those who are 'of his (YHWH's) people' in v. 3. This would allow a theological reading of the verse in line with what a number of commentators have suggested. Although Cyrus intended the ordinary reading offered above, the implied reader recognises the irony in his choice of words and his construction of the sentence. The fact that both readings can be justified on lexicographical and grammatical grounds increases the likelihood that the ambiguity is purposeful and is intended to contribute to irony.

Of course, many readers have supposed that Cyrus would never have issued such orders. The purpose of this study, however, is to determine in the first instance what the text meant to the implied reader, whether it is ultimately judged veracious or not. Accordingly, it is relevant to notice a strikingly similar use of נִשְׁאָר in Piel at Esth 9:3. In that passage the non-Judean officials all support the Judeans because the

fear of Mordecai has fallen upon them. A similar scenario is also in view with the same verb in Ezra 8:36. Apparently, then, the implied author meant to say that non-Judeans were to provide material support for the Judeans returning to Judea.

The ironic reading is continued with the use of גֹּר (to dwell as alien and dependant). It has been pointed out that for the ancient Hebrew reader this is a technical term that would have been unknown to the Persian bureaucracy. Williamson can only explain its appearance on the basis that the decree is a response to a petition by the Judeans and therefore, has used their own terminology in the response (1985: 11). He points to *AP* 32 and the Xanthos trilingual inscription as examples of official texts behind which a petition to the Achaemenid Persian administration is thought to lie. With respect to the implied reader, however, it seems difficult to insist that such language on Cyrus's part would necessarily have been perceived as indicating that he was responding to a previous request. This is especially so since in this instance also there was a standard 'pagan' usage which would have presented itself to the implied reader. Ancient texts reveal that resident aliens and their descendents preserved their original nationality indefinitely, unless admitted among the citizens of their new place of residence (Bickerman 1946: 261-62; *TDOT* II, 443-49; Ezra 4:9). From this perspective, Cyrus's choice of words could appear thoroughly pedestrian. The implied reader, therefore, may perceive two levels of meaning.

נִדְבָה is another term that has provoked considerable interest. It, too, has been identified as a Jewish technical cult term that would have been unknown to the Persian bureaucracy (Bedford 2001: 116). Here the possibility could be entertained that since Cyrus was reinstituting cultic practice, he may have taken the trouble to use correct terminology. But the word is used elsewhere in the HB of a voluntary act without the technical meaning (Hos. 14:5). Once again, then, it is possible that the implied reader understands a non-technical, simple meaning for the word while recognising a fuller significance of which the speaker himself was unaware.

From Cyrus's perspective, his mandate of personal support for the Judeans contributes to the completion of his announced project. While the offerings themselves are for the house of God in Jerusalem, the goods given to the Judeans for

their personal use make it possible for them to travel to Jerusalem to get the work done. This amounts to financing a government project by donation rather than taxation (although ch. 6 will reveal the expenditure of tax receipts for the project as well.) Cyrus is portrayed as bringing about the enrichment of the Judeans in connection with his desire to show respect to YHWH, connected with his own political aims. An analogy may be found in the Cyrus Cylinder, in which Cyrus is represented as beneficent to the Babylonians for the sake of Marduk.

There is further irony here, as well, however, since the narrator uses the non-Judean neighbours' support of the returning exiles to introduce an allusion to the despoiling of the Egyptians during the exodus from Egypt (Coats 1968: 450-57; Japhet 1991b: 213-14). This aspect is not mentioned in 6:3-5, which refers to public funding that is not brought up in ch. 1. The reference to the support of the neighbours seems to be included here for the purpose of highlighting this remarkable 'despoiling' theme. As the Israelites received vessels of silver and gold from their Egyptian neighbours,⁵¹ so the Judeans receive silver and gold from their neighbours in the various places they live within the Persian Empire. This may help to explain the addition of the word 'vessels' (כֵּלִי) in Ezra 1:6, making the parallel more explicit (Williamson 1985: 16; Allen 2003a: 19). The idea of leaving Babylon and returning to the land of promise as a second exodus is not an isolated theme in this passage. It appears also in Isa. 43:14-21; 48:21-22; 51:9-11; 52:11-12; Jer. 16:14-15; 23:7-8. This parallel with the exodus from Egypt creates an expectation that the exiles will become liberated from their foreign overlords, as they were in the earlier event. What is different in this case is that Cyrus has mandated the support and that there has been no protracted struggle with him as there was with Pharaoh.

Summary

King Cyrus of Persia has a central role in Ezra 1:1-4. Verses 2-4 are presented as the words of an edict he had proclaimed throughout his kingdom. That Cyrus had

⁵¹ Exod. 3:21-22; 11:2; 12:35-36; Ps. 105:37.

the edict proclaimed is attributed by the narrator to the stirring of his spirit by YHWH, who intends to fulfil prophecy he had given by Jeremiah previously. Strictly speaking, Cyrus's motivations are not stated in the narrative. This opens a gap that the implied reader feels constrained to fill.⁵² The language of the edict itself, however, has many parallels in ancient Near Eastern royal texts. On the basis of this historical evidence, it is likely that an ancient Judean reader would have understood Cyrus's edict to have been based on intentions similar to those reflected in similar texts. Specifically, it would appear that Cyrus was primarily asserting his dominion over the Judean exiles and wishing to appear respectful to their god, in the same way that he and other kings before and after him wished to appear respectful to the gods of many nations. Among the words of the edict reported by the narrator, there is nothing that does not fit the typical pattern of such proclamations. The narrator gives no indication that there is any reason to understand Cyrus as taking a view toward YHWH or YHWH's people different from the views taken by previous Assyrian and Babylonian rulers toward people groups whom they had subjected and their corresponding gods. But the narrative comment in v. 1 that Cyrus did this because YHWH stirred his spirit suggests that the narrator intends for the reader to understand events on two levels: the human level, represented by Cyrus's intentions, and the divine level, represented by YHWH's intentions. The narrator avoids saying that YHWH communicated with Cyrus or that Cyrus heard from YHWH. Although Cyrus is doing exactly what YHWH intends for him to do, Cyrus is portrayed as acting on the basis of his own intentions and possibly completely unaware of YHWH's intentions. The fact that several terms and phrases in Cyrus's edict admit of interpretation as conventional political rhetoric but can also carry significant theological connotations for Judean readers confirms the inkling that the narrator is winking at the reader. Thus, Cyrus, the most powerful ruler in the narrative world, appears to act as a tool used by YHWH to achieve his purpose of initiating the restoration of the exiles to their land. In so doing, Cyrus operates with less knowledge than the implied author and implied reader have about the significance of

⁵² See above, p. 50.

what he is accomplishing. At the very least, Cyrus's favourable action contributing to the reinstitution of worship in Jerusalem is portrayed as a result of divine intervention. This is the first instance of a pattern that will be repeated with respect to other kings in EN.

Ezra 1:5-11 is a short account of events that took place subsequent to the issuance of Cyrus's proclamation. The exiled Judeans (including Benjaminites and Levites), their neighbours and Cyrus all are significant actors.

Verse 5

Verse 5 presents a comparison between the returning Judeans and Cyrus by using the same phrase about stirring the spirit that was used in connection with Cyrus in v. 1. Just as the king was moved to action by YHWH, so the heads of the families mentioned here are also moved to action by YHWH. The comments above on v. 1⁵³ appear to be relevant in this case as well. The family heads are not depicted as obedient so much as under the influence of YHWH. Indeed, since all who were stirred arose, the implication is that there were none who were stirred but chose not to arise. As in Haggai, YHWH supplies a seemingly irresistible push. God's mercy to the exiles is understood in EN as consisting in the return to Judah and the rebuilding of the temple. These events are his doing, not theirs. This is clearly seen in Ezra 9:9. The earlier reading that Cyrus is not presented as obedient to YHWH, but still acting under his direction, is thus confirmed.

Another notable feature of v. 5 (and v. 6) is the close correspondence between the wording of the proclamation and the narrative wording of the response. Such similarity often has narrative significance.⁵⁴ Sternberg points out that verbatim repetition is not the norm, particularly when an initial verbal member (in this case, a proclamation) is repeated by a non-verbal member (the actions of the returning exiles and their neighbours) (1985: 388). Sternberg suggests that in such an instance the correspondence serves to underscore the words of the speaker (Cyrus). There are

⁵³ See above, p. 64.

⁵⁴ See above, p. 52.

complicating factors in this case, however. Rather than acting 'according to the command of Cyrus' or some similar phrase, the explanation given for the actions of the exiles is the effect of YHWH himself on their spirits. This draws attention back again to YHWH's initiative in these affairs. The reader is reminded that YHWH also prompted Cyrus to have these words proclaimed in the first place, so the correspondence is more properly described as being between what the people did and what YHWH had Cyrus say. These features function to minimise the focus on Cyrus and place it on YHWH. Cyrus does not emerge as a speaker whose words are obeyed to the letter. Rather YHWH emerges as one who is able to achieve his will through the agency of others.

From Ezra 1:5 on, it is apparent that Cyrus's decree is seen by the narrator as a means that allowed the goal of repatriation of Judean exiles and rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem to be realised. Although, as previously noted, Cyrus's own priorities were somewhat different, it is YHWH's priorities that the narrator has chosen to emphasise. But since the implied reader is aware of Cyrus's priorities and their divergence from YHWH's, irony is created.

For another HB example of this kind of irony one may turn to the story of Isaac blessing Jacob. Isaac's words of blessing are fulfilled. The one he blessed was in fact blessed. Yet, at the same time, Isaac's intentions were not fulfilled, since he intended to bless Esau. In all of this, YHWH's intention for the older to serve the younger was achieved. Similarly, Cyrus's edict is carried out, and the temple is built as he directed. His intention is understood to be the assertion of his dominion. From the narrator's perspective, nothing is achieved with respect to Cyrus's personal intentions. What is achieved is YHWH's intention for the exiles to return and reinstitute worship in Jerusalem.

Another kind of example may be taken from contemporary Canadian politics. When the federal government granted expanded powers of autonomy to the Quebec provincial government, this was welcomed by the separatist element within Quebec politics. It did not, however, bring about a greater sense of loyalty to the Canadian federal government on the part of those separatist elements. They continued to work to bring about a political separation from the rest of Canada. Analogously, the act of

assertion of sovereignty on the part of Cyrus was welcomed by the narrator of EN for its result (which may have been seen by the narrator as a step toward Judean independence), but this in no way implies any degree of loyalty to the Persian Empire on the narrator's part.

Verse 6

סְבִיבְתֵיהֶם in v. 6 almost certainly refers to non-Judeans, since Judeans would have been referred to by some such word as אֲזַחֵיהֶם (Rudolph 1949: 220). This strengthens the position of those who see an intentional allusion to the exodus from Egypt, since it is the non-Judeans who supply the Judeans. The mention of vessels of silver and vessels of gold is also consistent with an allusion to the events of the exodus.⁵⁵

Some have argued that the intended parallel is not with the plunder taken from the Egyptians at the time of the exodus, but with the offerings freely given for the building of the tabernacle in the wilderness or with the offerings for the building of the first temple (e.g. Blenkinsopp 1988: 78). It seems, however, that in EN the 'goods' are given to support the Judeans themselves, similar to the exodus, and the 'offerings' are used for the temple as a new element, unparalleled in the exodus. Alternatively, in addition to the support given in the exodus, out of which the Israelites themselves provided an offering for the tabernacle, the neighbours here may be seen to provide for the temple beyond the personal support for the Judeans. On this interpretation, the returned exiles are coming out of the exchange further ahead materially than did the Israelites of the exodus (Kidner 1979: 34; cf. Throntveit 1992: 16).

The chain of effect emerges clearly in v. 6. The generosity of the neighbours is portrayed as a result of Cyrus's decree, which was a result of YHWH's action. Thus, it is YHWH who has caused the generosity. In Exodus, the reader was told that YHWH gave the Israelites favour with their Egyptian neighbours. In Ezra 1, the

⁵⁵ See discussion of v. 4 above, p. 92.

reader is shown how YHWH brought such generosity about on the part of the neighbours in exile. In both places, the effect is attributed to YHWH. Only the means differs. In Exodus the Israelites themselves ask their neighbours for these items. In Ezra 1 the king does the asking. This contributes to the portrayal of Cyrus as having been acted upon by YHWH to sponsor the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem willingly, although Cyrus understands his own actions differently from the way that YHWH does.

Verse 7

Cyrus is described in this verse as bringing the vessels of the Jerusalem temple out of the temple of Nebuchadnezzar's gods. Mention of the temple vessels is not included in the proclamation, occurring instead in the narrative of Cyrus's actions. By contrast, in Ezra 6:3-5, the mention of the temple vessels is included in the written text of Cyrus's memorandum. The effect of this arrangement in ch. 1 is to depict Cyrus as performing two separate actions: making a decree and bringing out the temple vessels. There is a parallel structure with v. 6. Both begin with *waw+x+qatal* formations, providing synchronic information. The significance of this is that Cyrus's deed of bringing out the vessels is placed next to the contributions of the neighbours, making his act seem comparable to theirs. This interpretation is further supported by the syntax, which emphasises Cyrus's participation in the activities. In Ezra 6:5 he merely states in a document that the vessels should be restored to the Judean, in 1:7 he is the subject of an active verb, having the vessels brought out. He is, in effect, one of those 'surrounding' the Judeans and contributing valuables to their return (similarly Eskenazi 1988a: 47; Grabbe 1998: 12).

Cyrus's action in this verse is no less political from his standpoint than the elements of the proclamation, since he is known to have returned images to other shrines from which they had been taken. It is consistent with the Cyrus Cylinder, since that text seems to speak of repatriating 'gods' to their shrines (*ANET*, 316). In the case of the Israelites, the vessels were the closest thing they had to statues. For them, the return of the vessels provided an important link of continuity with the first temple (Ackroyd 1972). An ironic reading of Cyrus's actions is thus sustained.

This verse constructs a further comparison between Cyrus and Nebuchadnezzar. Cyrus's action is depicted as a direct reversal of Nebuchadnezzar's earlier action. The use of הוֹצִיָא with both subjects, the identification of vessels' destination and point of departure as Jerusalem, and the mention that they were taken from one house of god and placed in another—only to be returned to the first—all contribute to the perception of reversal. Cyrus is undoing what Nebuchadnezzar did. As Nebuchadnezzar was unwittingly carrying out YHWH's wishes, so Cyrus is here, although he does refer specifically to the charge he has been given. Nebuchadnezzar is not portrayed as understanding the theological reason for his success. Neither is Cyrus portrayed as understanding the theological aspect of restoration.

Mention of Nebuchadnezzar's god implies a setting in which it is taken for granted that different peoples have their own gods. Nebuchadnezzar has his own god and the Judeans have theirs. Cyrus represents a third party, not identified with either of the others.

The handling of epithets also contributes to Cyrus's characterisation here. The lack of further designation in connection with either Cyrus or Nebuchadnezzar (e.g., 'of Persia', of 'Babylon') avoids emphasising the difference between them. Cyrus appears as Nebuchadnezzar's successor. It was noted above that Cyrus was seen as standing in succession to the kings of Assyria and Babylonia,⁵⁶ and this will be evident throughout EN. He will again be designated 'king of Persia' in v. 8, where the epithet has a specific function.

Two final observations may be made on this verse. First, the fact that Cyrus returns cult articles in a reversal of action previously taken by a predecessor does not of itself imply that Cyrus takes a particularly favourable attitude toward Israel's god. One may compare this with the return of the ark by the Philistines in 1 Samuel 5. Second, on the matter of the possible parallel between Cyrus and Solomon, 1 Kgs. 7:51 states that Solomon 'brought in' the things David had dedicated and stored them in the treasuries of the Lord. Cyrus only brings out, giving the items to Sheshbazzar

⁵⁶ See p. 58.

to bring in (v. 8; Ezra 5:15). Cyrus assumes the royal role less than Sheshbazzar does.

Verse 8

The narrator represents Cyrus the king having the vessels transferred to Sheshbazzar the prince (שֶׁשְׁבַצָּר) of Judah. It is unlikely that this designation is used of Sheshbazzar to inspire hopes for a renewed Davidic monarchy (cf. Williamson 1985: 5; Japhet 1982: 80, 98). It is more likely that the narrator wishes to depict a handover from one kind of leader to another. The major effect is to emphasise that the vessels were passing from Persian control to Judean control. This is why the epithet 'king of Persia' reappears in this verse, as a contrast to 'prince of Judah'. There is also a likely connection with the exodus. The same term is used to refer to the leaders of the tribes when they present the offerings for the tabernacle in the wilderness.⁵⁷

Thus, the use of שֶׁשְׁבַצָּר contributes to the reader's understanding that the vessels have passed from Persian to Judean control, that a kind of second exodus is underway, and that the temple to be rebuilt in Jerusalem stands in continuity not only with the first temple but with the tabernacle in the wilderness as well. Each of the latter two themes is evident in other features of this passage as well.

The transfer of vessels from Cyrus's to Sheshbazzar's control signifies a shift with respect to the role of temple-builder as well. In the remainder of EN, it is Sheshbazzar who is seen as founder of the temple, not Cyrus. Cyrus is portrayed as distant from the actual reconstruction, markedly so in contrast to Solomon in the case of the first temple, and uniquely so in comparison with other ancient Near Eastern examples.

⁵⁷ Num. 7:18, 24, 30, etc. Since the term is also used in the account of the dedication of the temple (1 Kgs. 8:1; 2 Chron. 5:2), a further connection is established with the place of worship. It is likely a 'both/and' rather than an 'either/or' situation.

Verse 11b

The mention of the actual journey from Babylonia to Jerusalem completes the idea of reversal by having the vessels transported to their place of origin. The use of the niphal of עלה emphasises YHWH's power and effectiveness and recalls the exodus from Egypt once again (Williamson 1985: 19). He is ultimately the one who reverses the captivity of people and vessels, not Cyrus. Cyrus plays his initiating role by bringing the vessels out of the temple in Babylon, but even on the human plane it is Sheshbazzar who reverses the carrying away by carrying the vessels back to Jerusalem. This is similar to the earlier part of the chapter, where Cyrus is the initiator of the temple reconstruction, and the Judean exiles take on the task, but all act only at YHWH's prompting. The scheme is also similar to the exodus from Egypt in that both Cyrus and the Judeans are the objects of YHWH's action, just as both Pharaoh and the Israelites were in the Exodus narrative. Finally, Sheshbazzar continues the displacement of Cyrus from royal roles.

Cyrus and Pharaoh

The numerous suggestions that the return of Judeans to Judea is to be seen as a second exodus evokes a parallel between Cyrus with Pharaoh. This parallel contributes significantly to the portrayal of Cyrus. Both are understood to be rulers who held Israel captive outside the land of promise. Both ultimately allow the Israelites to leave the land of their captivity on a journey that results in the establishment of a major locus of the Israelite cult. Although both Pharaoh and Cyrus acknowledge the mighty works of YHWH (Pharaoh perhaps more sincerely than Cyrus!), the implied reader does not infer that either becomes a true (that is, exclusive) worshipper of YHWH. Both of them are the objects of YHWH's action upon their internal being. The difference between them is that Pharaoh had his heart hardened so that he tried to hinder the journey to establish the worship of YHWH, while Cyrus's spirit was stirred to expedite such a journey. In the case of Pharaoh, his hard heart allowed YHWH to gain glory by bringing plague after plague upon Egypt and drowning the Egyptian army in the Sea of Reeds. In the case of Cyrus, his stirred spirit allowed YHWH to gain glory by obtaining resources from the Persian

Empire to rebuild the Jerusalem temple on a voluntary basis, without resistance (cf. van Wijk-Bos 1998: 19).

The result is that Cyrus is portrayed as one whose contribution to the fulfilment of YHWH's purposes is a consequence of divine intervention. The narrator highlights his activity in issuing the proclamation and returning the temple vessels in order to show YHWH's involvement, not to indicate a disposition on Cyrus's part. In fact, the text only makes sense if Cyrus would not have done these things without YHWH's stirring. It is crucial to understand that this is part of the narrator's portrayal of Cyrus. To understand Cyrus as having a benevolent outlook on the Judeans in this narrative is to misread.

Summary

Ezra 1:5-11 describes some of the immediate aftermath of Cyrus's decree. The spirits of some of the heads of families from Judah and Benjamin and of some of the priests and Levites are stirred by YHWH, just as Cyrus's spirit was stirred, and they prepare to go up to Jerusalem to build the house of God there. Parallel to the description of the proclamation in 1:1-4, the ultimate reason given for events is the action of YHWH. The effect is that the implied reader recognises YHWH, rather than Cyrus or the Judean leaders, as the character directing the restoration. Thus, the irony developed in 1:1-4 continues in 1:5-11. Although Cyrus's decree is obeyed, it is because of YHWH's action.

The use of specific terminology and the mention of donations of silver and gold contribute to the establishment of a 'second exodus' theme. This invites comparison between Cyrus and the Egyptian Pharaoh, who are conscripted by YHWH to play similar roles, albeit Cyrus 'willingly' and Pharaoh 'unwillingly'. In conjunction with the second exodus motif, the description of the return of the temple vessels allows the implied reader to see Cyrus as one of those despoiled in this exodus. The avoidance of epithets in the description of the return of the temple vessels also presents Cyrus as the successor to Nebuchadnezzar, consistent with the impression that Cyrus is another of the many foreign ancient Near Eastern kings with whom the Judeans have had to deal. The implied reader expects Cyrus to be mainly

similar to these other kings. As throughout EN, Cyrus's foreignness from a Judean perspective remains prominent. Finally, Ezra 1:5-11 initiates a shift in Cyrus's role with respect to building the temple in Jerusalem. From this point in the narrative, the temple rebuilding is portrayed as the Judeans' project much more than as Cyrus's. This contrasts significantly with the role of kings in temple construction in both biblical and extra-biblical accounts.

Ezra 2

Ezra 2 provides further confirmation of features noted in ch. 1. The mention of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, once again provides a contrast with Cyrus, king of Persia (2:1). Not only does his epithet stand out in contrast to that associated with Cyrus in ch. 1, but he is shown acting in his appropriate 'Babylonian' role, taking the exiles into captivity in Babylonia. This underlines the different role Cyrus plays in returning the exiles to Judea.

Another feature that is confirmed is that Cyrus was used by YHWH for purposes beyond those Cyrus had in mind. One of the results of the decree, according to Ezra 2:70, is that all Israel lived in their towns; a resettlement of the exiles took place. This goes well beyond what Cyrus decreed (cf. Bedford 2001: 90). Many scholars suppose that the people listed as returning in Ezra 2 did not all come in one wave of migration and may have found their way back to Judea over an extended period of time (e.g. Grabbe 1992: 35). In fact, the narrative does not disavow such a scenario. But the juxtaposition of chapter 2 immediately following chapter 1 makes the point that what is found in chapter 2 is a result of what was told in chapter 1. The numbers of returned exiles given are far more than would be necessary for temple reconstruction. Although permission to return was granted for temple rebuilding purposes, it appears that many took advantage of the permission simply to return to the land of promise.

Summary: Ezra 1-2

Ezra 1 presents Cyrus, king of Persia, as an ironic character. Although clearly the dominant ruler of his time, exercising dominion throughout the ancient Near

East, Cyrus is portrayed by the narrator of EN as rather unwittingly achieving YHWH's purposes, expressed many years earlier in the prophecy of Jeremiah. The mode of characterisation used is mainly covert, but is no less effective for it. The narrator achieves his effect by carefully choosing the details he includes in the narrative as well as the terms he uses to express those details. YHWH is said at the beginning of the chapter to rouse Cyrus to action in terms that imply Cyrus's ignorance of the process. Throughout the rest of the chapter Cyrus is depicted as speaking and acting in ways familiar to ancient Near Eastern readers as common among powerful despots. Such speech and behaviour were well known to serve a propagandistic function, asserting the legitimacy of the king to rule over his subject peoples. Although the amount of data is limited, the fact that Cyrus does not appear to have any traits other than those generally associated with ancient Near Eastern rulers causes the implied reader to interpret his behaviour along conventional lines. He seems to be a 'type' in this narrative.⁵⁸ The narrator's careful choice of terminology, however, consistently enables the implied reader to understand that, in the case of the events described in Ezra 1, Cyrus's intentions have been subordinated to YHWH's. As a polytheist and a foreigner (i.e., a 'typical' ancient Near Eastern ruler), his help in the process of the Judean restoration is understood to be motivated by concerns fundamentally different from those of the narrator. Thus, although the very things Cyrus decrees are carried out, the implied reader sees that they achieve YHWH's purposes, while the purposes likely intended by Cyrus are never said to be achieved (contrary to the Cyrus Cylinder, in which Cyrus is praised and his rule extolled as a blessing from Marduk). This largely covert representation will be confirmed more overtly in Ezra 6. The explicit and implicit allusions to other kings in the chapter locate Cyrus among other non-Israelite rulers in the HB who also achieved YHWH's purposes unwittingly.

⁵⁸ See above, p. 53.

CHAPTER 3: EZRA 3-4

Ezra 3:7

Ezra 3:7 contains a brief reference to the 'authorisation' (רְשִׁיוֹן) that the Judeans had received from Cyrus. The narrator notes that Jeshua, Zerubbabel and others hired stonemasons and craftsmen and arranged for cedar trees to be brought to Joppa. They are said to have done this according to the רְשִׁיוֹן of Cyrus. The Hebrew word is a *hapax legomenon*. Some render it 'grant' (e.g. NRSV), but others take it to mean 'authority' (e.g. REB). In any event it is clear from both lexical options and context that the Judean builders are able to make these provisions because of Cyrus's previous action. It is his authority that gives them the means in their circumstances to move forward with the building process.

As Eskenazi points out (1989: 176), this reference to Cyrus 'highlights the continued impact of the initial document'. This is consistent with Cyrus's role throughout the remainder of the narrative of EN. It is the order he issued at a specific point in time that is important for the building process, rather than any ongoing personal interest in the project on his part. Outside of issuing the decree and having the temple vessels brought out to Sheshbazzar in Ezra 1, Cyrus does nothing in the narrative to support the building process. Here at Ezra 3:7 and later in Ezra 5-6, his decree is referred to, and its importance for enabling the building to proceed is noted. On the other hand, during Cyrus's reign, the enemies of the Judeans will be able to discourage the builders and stymie progress. The picture that emerges is not that Cyrus was a ruler who was personally supportive of the reconstruction effort, but rather that on one occasion he was moved by YHWH to issue a royal order that initiated the rebuilding and then sustained it at crucial points along the way. This is not only a likely reconstruction of historical events; it is the *narrator's* way of telling the story. The lack of real progress that is achieved during Cyrus's reign (cf. Ezra 4:5) supports the view suggested earlier that the issuance of his edict was primarily motivated by politically propagandistic concerns.

It has been pointed out that the wording of this verse invites associations with the work of Solomon in 1 Kgs 5:15ff.; 1 Chron. 22:2-4; 2 Chron 1:18ff.; 2:7-15 (Williamson 1985: 47). But whereas Solomon dealt directly with the masons, Tyrians and others, in Ezra 3:7 it is Zerubbabel, Jeshua and their 'brothers' who have the direct contact. None of these Judeans is in the position of king, yet they as a group assume the role attributed to the king in narratives about pre-exilic times. Cyrus is less directly involved than Solomon was, and appears to be distant from the actual temple construction. This is an important consideration in any comparison of the portrayals of Cyrus and Solomon. Cyrus merely gives authorisation for the people to do what Solomon did before.

There is a further possibility that must be considered. McConville has written,

Together with these intimations of Solomon there is in addition more than a suggestion of the prophecy contained in Isa. 60:10-14, where there is reference not only to the wealth of Lebanon, but also to "foreigners" rebuilding Jerusalem. The chief "foreigner" here is Cyrus, who thus appears not merely as the unwitting servant of the Lord, but of the exiles themselves (1985: 22).

If Isa. 60:10-14 is considered to be part of the implied reader's background, then Cyrus appears to be portrayed rather clearly as the servant of the returned community. It becomes hard to see him in the role of Solomon.⁵⁹ In terms of an analogy with the building of the first temple, Cyrus is to be placed with the hired foreigners. It is not entirely clear that an allusion to Isa. 60:10-14 is intended in Ezra 3. Nevertheless, it remains a fact that throughout EN Cyrus and the other Persian kings are cast in just such a role as foreigners who contribute to the re-establishment of Jerusalem and the temple without themselves becoming participants in the cult.

⁵⁹ This is another instance of co-textual inference, see above, p. 40.

Ezra 4

Verses 1-3

The narrative of Ezra 4 involves interaction between the people earlier identified as Judah and Benjamin (Ezra 1:5) and a group identified as their enemies. In Ezra 1 it was Judah, Benjamin, priests and Levites whose hearts were stirred by YHWH to respond to Cyrus's edict. Ezra 3 narrated their activity in setting up the altar on its foundation (3:3), restoring the sacrificial system (3:4, 5) and laying the foundation of the temple (3:10, 11). Ezra 3 also introduced the 'peoples of the lands' (3:3), of whom the returned exiles were said to be afraid. It would seem that the same two groups are in view in Ezra 4, namely, Judah and Benjamin on the one hand, and the peoples of the lands, also called 'the enemies of Judah and Benjamin', on the other (Ezra 4:1).

These enemies are said to hear that the returned exiles are in process of building a temple to YHWH. At this they approach the leadership of the temple-building group and express a desire to join in the building with them (4:1-2). They claim to venerate the god of the exiles just as the exiles themselves do, and to have been sacrificing to him⁶⁰ since the days of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria. There is nothing in the reported speech of these enemies that would immediately mark them as hostile to the returned exiles. The narrator has designated them as such, however, possibly in anticipation of their actions reported in 4:4ff. Such evaluative designations are always accurate in the HB narrative world (Sternberg 1985: 476). Thus, it is unsurprising when the reply comes from the Judean leaders to the effect that the 'enemies' will not take part with them in the building of the house for their god.

The 'king of Assyria' (v. 2) will appear as a character again further along in the narrative (Ezra 6:22). In his introduction at this point, he is presented as responsible for the occupation of Judah by people hostile to the returned exiles. This will be an important element of his identity when he is mentioned again.

⁶⁰ Reading לָהֶם, "to him", with the qere and virtually all commentators.

The leaders of the Judeans insist that the enemies will not have any part in the rebuilding of the temple. Rather, they will do the building by themselves (4:3).⁶¹ The reason given is that this is what Cyrus commissioned them to do.⁶² In the rest of the narrative, cultic legitimation is achieved by adherence to the commands of Moses (Ezra 3:3; Neh. 8:1, etc.) or David (Ezra 3:10; 8:20; Neh. 12:24, etc.). Stipulations of the Persian king do not seem to be a factor.⁶³ At the same time, there is a pronounced concern that the community of the exiles maintain separation from the 'peoples of the land(s)' (Ezra 6:21; 9:2; Neh. 2:20; 9:2; etc.). Taken together, these considerations lead the reader to assume that the leaders of the Judeans are not sticklers for adherence to Persian decrees so much as keenly aware that Cyrus's decree has provided them with grounds to maintain the integrity of the group involved in the temple rebuilding. A participant in the cult must withdraw from the state of ceremonial uncleanness among the nations of the land (Ezra 6:21).

This 'use' of the decree by the community provides support for the reading of the narrative in Ezra 1 proposed earlier. The Israelites have an agenda, and Cyrus's commission turns out to be useful in achieving it. It is questionable whether Cyrus would have objected to the collaboration of those previously deported to Palestine. But there is no effort made by the Judeans to inquire of Cyrus about the matter. They find it convenient to be able to point to the letter of his decree, which names only them as temple rebuilders.

The preceding observation also has implications for the way in which the narrative relates to the traditional ancient Near Eastern ideology concerning kings and temples. Bedford argues that the Ezra narrative relies on the kingship of Cyrus to legitimate the rebuilding (2001: 279). But this assumes that the narrator takes Cyrus's edict at face value and that the Judeans' response to their enemies' request to join in the rebuilding is motivated by a desire to follow the king's instructions

⁶¹ On the meaning of יָחַד, see Williamson (1985: 42).

⁶² For the meaning of צִוָּה as "to commission" see *HALOT* II, 1011.

⁶³ Neh. 11:23 seems to refer to a directive from a Persian king concerning the singers. It is not completely clear what the nature of this directive was, and its obscurity tends to efface its significance.

scrupulously. In the eyes of the narrator, the legitimization of the temple is based on YHWH's initiative in having it rebuilt and the correspondence of the cult practised at it to the commands of Moses and David. It appears that the community shares the narrator's view on this subject. But there can be no doubt that the community and the narrator both recognise that in the absence of imperial authorisation for the rebuilding project, it would be unfeasible to pursue it in the political circumstances in which the community found itself. In this sense Cyrus's kingship and edict provide legitimization for the rebuilding in the eyes of those outside the community of returned exiles. The exiles understand this and attempt to put it to good use in Ezra 3-5. It appears, then, that the Judeans were well aware of the ancient Near Eastern temple ideology, but sought to turn it to their advantage rather than perceiving themselves to be bound by it.

There are at least two implications of the relationship of Cyrus to the exiles as the implied reader reflects on the narrative to this point. First, the enemies' brief description of their history forms (and is probably calculated to form) a direct parallel with that of the returned exiles. They have been brought 'here' by the king who was reigning over the empire at that time, and wish to participate in building the temple to YHWH, evidently with a view to practicing his sacrificial cult. The exiles have similarly come to Jerusalem as a result of the action of the emperor, with the aim of restoring YHWH's temple and cult. The reader is to understand, however, that the intentions of the enemies are not the same as the intentions of the Judeans. The enemies' use of rhetoric that makes them sound as though they have similar aims does not guarantee that they in fact do. The reader is reminded that such rhetoric is frequently employed for political reasons and to fulfil motives that are possibly at odds with those of the community.⁶⁴ Those who express interest in rebuilding the Jerusalem temple may even turn out to be enemies of Judah. This tends to confirm the earlier reading at Ezra 1 which saw Cyrus's rhetoric as motivated by concerns different from those of the community of exiles. In Ezra 4, as in Ezra 1, the narrator makes no explicit statement that the rhetoric is disingenuous. In Ezra 4, however,

⁶⁴ See on Ezra 1-2, p. 70.

there is an immediate indication of this by the report of the enemies' subsequent actions. While Cyrus is not reported to act in a way that belies insincerity on his part, his lack of subsequent action in the narrative substantiates a similar conclusion.

Second, Cyrus may be compared not only to the enemies, but to Esarhaddon as well (v. 2). Esarhaddon's earlier action has resulted in the presence of people in Judah who express an interest in and a history of worshipping YHWH. But this is not assumed by the implied reader to have been his primary motivation for bringing them there. There is a recognition that kings arrange even their cultic undertakings as a means to personal political ends. Similarly, the fact that Cyrus's action results in the presence of the returned exiles in Judah with the cult of YHWH restored allows for the possibility that such was not the primary intention of Cyrus.

Verses 4-5

The precise function of vv. 4-5 is debated. Talmon (1987: 360) and Williamson (1985: 43-45) see this portion of the text as a summary notation summarising the contents of chapter 3 and the first three verses of chapter 4. On this understanding, the bribery mentioned in 4:5 does not necessarily occur subsequent to the events of 4:1-3, but may have been occurring from the time of 3:3 on. It is difficult to be sure whether this suggestion reflects the intention of the implied author; the temporal markers are vague, and 4:1-3 does not relate an incident in which the enemies do something that explicitly discourages the building. What is safe to conclude is that in 4:4-5 the narrator wishes to depict a situation in which the people of Judah were discouraged by the actions of the people of the land and that this state of affairs persisted as long as Cyrus was alive and even up until the reign of Darius. The vagueness of temporal reference indicates that the narrator is unconcerned with conveying sequential precision. His greater interest lies in sketching the circumstances which the people of Judah faced throughout the period. There was persistent opposition to the temple-building from the neighbouring peoples, to the point of paying officials to interfere with the project.

The specific phrase used in 4:4 to represent the act of discouragement is עֲמָ הָאָרֶץ 'the hands (of) slack (the)'. The subject of this action is

people of the land'. The narrator does not seem to take care to distinguish 'the people(s) of the land(s)' (Ezra 3:3; 4:5) from the 'enemies of Judah and Benjamin' (Ezra 4:1). Most commentators have recognised that these terms are used by the implied author to designate those who are not part of the group of returnees and who, in addition, tend to act in opposition to their interests (cf. Bedford 2001: 91-92 n. 7). Thus, it seems that the implied reader is to understand that the Judeans faced opposition from those who were occupying the land when the exiles returned, without making distinctions about which specific group of people opposed them at which point in time. It is these generalised opponents who 'made their hands slack'.

The location of these enemies in Palestine is due to the action of the king of Assyria. This connection is significant, for at a later point in the narrative, the king of Assyria will be said to do according to the opposite idiom, 'to strengthen their hands' (6:22). At this stage, the king of Assyria is connected with those who discourage the returned exiles.

The actions of the enemies reflect on the king in another way as well. The means by which the discouragement was accomplished was bribery of יועצים 'counsellors' (Ezra 4:5). These would most likely be understood as officials having influence with the king (cf. Ezra 7:14; Porten 1968: 282-83). This disclosure suggests to the implied reader that the king may be significantly affected by the influence of those around him (Becking 1999: 267). Indeed, this will be confirmed repeatedly in the subsequent narrative. In fact, the king's actions have only been at the prompting of YHWH to this point in the narrative, so his portrayal in Ezra 4 generalises his representation as one who is subject to the influence of others.

Both Cyrus and Darius are here named with the attached epithet 'king of Persia'. The title seems to function similarly to the way it did in Ezra 1. They are identified as rulers of the great empire, standing in the train of the Assyrians and Babylonians, but representing an era in which the experience of the exiled Judeans is in important ways new and different from what it was under the Assyrians and Babylonians. Darius is introduced at this point for the first time, and it is clear that he is a successor to Cyrus.

It should not be missed that the role of 'king of Persia' begins in Ezra 4:5 to blend the individuals who occupy it into something like a single character. This is partly achieved through the use of the common epithet for both Cyrus and Darius. But it is also facilitated by the revelation that no progress was made on the temple from the time of Cyrus to the time of Darius. Although the text does not mention it, this would have included the reign of Cambyses, who ruled between the two, a period of eight years. Since the text does not refer to Cambyses, it cannot be assumed that the implied reader would have known of him. But the text does specify that the work stoppage continued until the second year of Darius, implying that for at least a year the same effect was achieved in his reign. In other words, who specifically is ruling on the Persian throne begins to seem unimportant. All Persian kings appear to act alike. Given the 'typical' nature of Cyrus in Ezra 1, such a development is not surprising. This blending is only seen in a minimal way at this point, but will be developed further in the narrative.

Another aspect of Cyrus's characterisation concerns his lack of activity in this portion of the narrative.⁶⁵ One of the critical observations made of this part of the narrative by scholars with a historical bent is that it is odd for so little to have been accomplished on the rebuilding of the temple if Cyrus was as supportive of it as he is made out to be in Ezra 1 (and 6) (Heinz 1987: 322; Bedford 2001: 154-55). It might be expected that a fairly massive bribery campaign would be required to interfere with a project enjoying such forthright royal backing. If the analysis presented here is correct, however, the implied reader may not find the lack of progress surprising at all. If Cyrus's main concern was to make a political statement for propagandistic purposes, putting himself on record as a supporter of the cult of YHWH, he may not have sensed any particular urgency to actually follow through on the project, especially in light of the fact that Judah was a rather minor component of his empire. The public declaration by a king of his intent to restore a temple was sometimes more important than making sure the work was carried out. Esarhaddon is known to have ordered the rebuilding of the Esagila, only for the completion of the project to

⁶⁵ A character's lack of activity may be significant, see above, p. 44.

have occurred many years later under Assurbanipal (Glatt 1993: 18). Kuhrt has questioned to what extent Cyrus actually undertook other cultic restorations he was on record as having supported (Kuhrt 1983: 83-97). Leith writes in this regard that 'the term *restore* is ambiguous; we do not know how much religious innovating Nabonidus actually did that needed undoing, and there is no evidence for any rebuilding or repair of Mesopotamian temples during the reign of Cyrus. Life in Babylonia proceeded much as before' (1998: 378). Berquist states forthrightly that '[t]he lack of emphasis for this project [temple reconstruction] is not surprising; Cyrus' interests were on the unconquered territories toward the east' (1995: 29). It is quite likely that the implied reader understood Cyrus's edict in Ezra 1 as primarily political propaganda. That his support for the project should be defused with relative ease would not seem strange, for it is *Cyrus*, and not the narrator, who makes the statements about supporting temple reconstruction, both in Ezra 1 and Ezra 6. Once again, whether Cyrus actually issued such decrees, and whether the history actually transpired as reported in EN is not the issue. The point is rather that the implied reader likely made sense out of Cyrus's edict in Ezra 1 and the enemies' success in hindering the project throughout his reign in the way suggested here. Thus, the historically-minded critics are right in feeling a tension between the rhetoric of Cyrus's decree in Ezra 1 and the lack of progress made before his death, but this very tension is part of the sense of the narrative.

This interpretation also explains why the Judeans did not press their claim with Cyrus. Bedford in particular has expressed the thought that if the building was really delayed by the local opposition as the narration in the text has it, then the Judeans could have brought their royal backing to bear on the problem (2001: 160). In this way he argues that it is historically unlikely that Cyrus ever issued a decree in support of reconstruction of the Jerusalem temple. But if the reality was that decrees such as that in Ezra 1 were primarily propaganda and that the decisions of kings were subject to the vicissitudes of political influence and perceived expediency, then it is understandable from a historical perspective why the Judeans may not have thought their chances of surmounting the obstacle of bribed officials to be promising. And whether this was actually the way it happened or not, the implied reader can certainly

make sense of the plot. Moreover, it should be pointed out that the text does not say that no appeals were made by the Judeans, only that the enemies' designs prevailed.

We must face the fact that in the narrative of EN, Cyrus's only contribution to the restoration is the issuance of his decree mandating the return of exiles to construct the temple and his bringing out of the temple vessels for their return to the temple, which itself is portrayed in Ezra 1 as his response to his own directive. The all-important proclamation is only a result of YHWH's action upon Cyrus's spirit. Cyrus takes no further action to support the project, even when the project falters.

Verses 6-23

There has been much discussion in the scholarly literature about Ezra 4:6-23. The main question has to do with the way in which this section is to be understood as fitting into the narrative. One widely-held view is that this portion represents a 'flash-forward' to the reigns of Xerxes and Artaxerxes before returning to the reign of Darius, the point to which the narrative had brought the reader in Ezra 4:5 (Blenkinsopp 1988: 111). Another view is that this section is to be understood as continuing the regular chronological sequence, and that Xerxes and Artaxerxes are to be understood as reigning after the Darius of Ezra 4:5 and before the Darius of Ezra 4:24. The latter view requires either that the Darius of Ezra 4:24 is Darius II (423-405) (Dequeker 1993: 75-76) or that the narrator is confused about the order of the Persian kings (Böhler 1997: 136). Since it has already been noted that the implied author is unconcerned to give a strict chronological account of his subject, the former view is adopted in this analysis.

The point of inserting this portion into the narrative here is to continue the ongoing theme of the consistent opposition to rebuilding by the peoples of the land. In fact, Ezra 4:11-22 does not even address the building of the temple, but rather the building of the city walls. Apparently the implied reader is to see the rebuilding of both temple and city as parts of a larger project (cf. Isa. 44:28), which could be referred to as the restoration from exile. It is against this entire larger project that the

enemies stand. What the reader learns in this proleptic view forms his expectations for later parts of the narrative.⁶⁶

Verse 6

Ezra 4:6 contains a notice that 'they' (presumably the enemies of the Judeans) wrote a charge or item of indictment (שְׁטוּחַ, *HALOT* II, 1317) against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. The subject of the verb 'to write' is not specified. Again, the reference to the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem does not exactly match any of the designations used to describe the returned exiles to this point. Yet it seems that this brief episode is intended as analogous to what has immediately preceded. The Judeans are opposed by adversaries.

To whom this document was written is not stated. Xerxes carries out no action in this verse. It is simply noted that the charge was put in writing in the first year of his reign. The reader is not told whether Xerxes knew about this accusation or not. And if he did know about it, there is no report given of any response on his part. Xerxes is 'merely' a Persian king in this narrative (although the title is not used, reference is made to his reign), known to have ruled, but seemingly distant, uninvolved in events in Judah either to help or harm the Judeans (cf. Karrer 2001: 100).

Verse 7

With Ezra 4:7 the reader is presented with another brief episode, more curious than the previous one. This one takes place in the days of Artaxerxes. Artaxerxes is designated 'king of Persia', thus sharing that characteristic with Cyrus and Darius. He is their successor, ruling the empire in the post-Babylonian period. An individual named Bishlam, together with his associates, of whom two are named, is said to have written to Artaxerxes. The reader is not told what was written, or even the character

⁶⁶ On the function of prolepsis in narrative for creating expectations, see above, p. 50.

of the document. All that is divulged is that they wrote a letter to the king in Aramaic, and it was translated. In this case Artaxerxes is not merely the reigning monarch; he is also the recipient of the letter. There is no clear indication that it contained negative representations concerning the Judeans, although, as with the preceding verse, the location in the narrative at this point seems to imply that such aspersions were cast (cf. Fensham 1982: 70-71). Artaxerxes only hears the contents of the letter; no response is reported on his part.

Verse 8

Yet another letter appears to be introduced in Ezra 4:8-11. It must be admitted that the transition from v. 7 to v. 8 is rough, and the connection between v. 8 and v. 9 is difficult again. These verses have attracted plenty of scholarly discussion, and no solution to the problems is proposed here. What can be said is that v. 8 names two individuals, Rehum and Shimshai, who are said to hold official bureaucratic positions, chancellor (בעל־טעם, literally 'one who gives orders' or 'one who issues edicts') and scribe, respectively. These important people write a letter to Artaxerxes that is explicitly against Jerusalem. Since the antagonism towards Jerusalem is explicit, it is natural to assume that the notice in v. 7 also refers to an instance of opposition, consistent with the surrounding text.

Verses 9-10

The introduction to v. 9 is difficult because of the presence of וְכֵן, 'then'. This gives the impression that a second introduction to the letter is presented. But there is no verb in vv. 9-10. Many commentators (e.g. Williamson 1985: 53-54; Blenkinsopp 1988: 109-12) take these verses as essentially a list of senders. Porten suggests that the names may have come from the outside of the letter, where it was customary to specify the sender (1983: 396-415). Williamson's suggestion (1985: 54) that וְכֵן was transposed from the beginning of v. 8 would support Porten's interpretation. Whether this is the solution or not, it appears that vv. 9-10 are to

function as the introduction from the document itself, since the narrator has already given his introduction in v. 8. It is thus to be read as the voice of the letter's writers.

There has been considerable discussion over the list of nouns that round out v. 9. Most of the uncertainty is related to whether particular nouns should be taken as describing a function (e.g. 'judges') or as a gentilic (e.g. 'people of Dina') (cf. Williamson 1985: 54-55; Klein 1999: 698). In some cases, if a noun is understood as gentilic, there is still debate about the people or geographical region the term is intended to refer to. On any reading of this verse, however, it emerges that Rehum and Shimshai are supported in their hostile missive by a large group of others. In fact, it seems that practically everyone who is not a returned Judean exile must have attached their name to it. Verse 10 makes explicit that all the nations who were brought *to* the region by Ashurbanipal were represented. This is consistent with the scenario already established: the returned Judean exiles are opposed by the peoples who were brought in by the Assyrian rulers. The Assyrian rulers are therefore the ultimate cause of this opposition.

Verse 12

The letter states that the Judeans are building the city of Jerusalem, which it describes as rebellious and evil. The implied reader may be aware that with this episode, the narrative is no longer dealing directly with the scenario of rebuilding the temple. It appears that the writers are attempting to alarm the king by raising the prospect of one of a ruler's perennial worries. The tactic of singling out Judeans as an ethnic group for suspicion is also encountered in Esther and Daniel (e.g. Est. 3:8; Dan. 3:12).

Verse 13

The way in which the writers of the letter attempt to show the relevance of the matter to the king is instructive. The accusers develop their argument by claiming that if the city is in fact rebuilt, the Judeans will cease paying the required taxes and the kings will inevitably come out the worse for it. Here is introduced the suggestion

that the kings are concerned above all with receiving income, and that from their perspective, the most important element in their relationship with the Judeans is that the Judeans pay taxes to them. The implied reader, of course, places much higher value on the rebuilding of Jerusalem than on the payment of taxes to Persian kings. Thus, the possibility of a significant divergence between the values of the Persian kings and the values of the reader has arisen, consistent with the ironic reading of Cyrus's proclamation in Ezra 1. The theme of taxation recurs in EN (Neh. 5:4; 9:37).

The choice of grammatical number also affects the reader's perception. By using the plural 'kings', the writers represent them as a single group. The mention of Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes and Artaxerxes in this chapter in connection with the opposing tactics of the enemies has already tended to blur them together in the reader's mind. Here that tendency is reinforced, as it appears that the letter writers also view the Persian kings rather like successive actors in a single role instead of as a set of distinct, individual characters. One result at this point is that the idea that the Persian king places paramount importance on collecting taxes is subtly generalised as a characteristic of all of them.

Verse 14

The king's position on this matter is taken for granted. The writers reason that in light of their relationship of loyalty and obligation, it is inappropriate for them to stand by while dishonour comes to the king. This they present as the sole reason for their letter and their desire to inform the king of matters. Once again, the prospect of the withholding of taxes is equated with dishonour for the king. The enemies clearly expect that the king shares their point of view and will find their rhetoric persuasive.

The use of careful rhetoric becomes apparent. The implied reader has been given the impression that Rehum and company are proceeding as they are because they oppose the Judeans, not because they are loyal to the king. There is therefore a perceived insincerity in their writing, which is consistent with the outlook present throughout EN whereby rhetoric, even inscribed in official documents, is often motivated by subsurface interests. Connected with this is the motif of the king being exploited by others to achieve their own aims. This already was seen to be

happening with the Judeans in Ezra 4:3, and even with YHWH and the Judeans in Ezra 1.

Verses 15-16

The rhetoric even takes a turn to the extreme. The enemies recommend that the king substantiate the validity of their concerns by making a search in the record books of his ancestors. They assure him that he will learn that Jerusalem is a rebellious city and has been damaging to kings in the past, with a history of revolt from ancient times. They maintain that this incorrigible tendency on Jerusalem's part is the very reason why it was laid waste in the first place. Their implied argument is that since Jerusalem has been consistently rebellious in the past, it will necessarily continue to be so in the present and future. Such an argument is, of course, formally invalid, quite apart from the question of the truthfulness of its premise. It is calculated to be persuasive, however, to a king who is largely concerned with avoiding rebellion and the concomitant loss of tax revenue (cf. Smith-Christopher 2001: 314). The implied reader understands the rhetorical process taking shape and its dishonest representation of affairs and wonders whether the king will be drawn in by it.

Here, too, a connection is made between the Persians and kings of the previous dynasties. The description of the record books as belonging to the king's ancestors continues to develop the motif of grouping the Persian rulers with the Assyrians and Babylonians before them. The implied reader can only imagine that the rebelliousness alluded to relates to the neo-Assyrian and neo-Babylonian empires. The rebellion in the time of Nebuchadnezzar, in particular, would connect with the occasion of Jerusalem's destruction. It is unlikely that the Achaemenids themselves made record of these events when they occurred. Rather, they inherited the records of the Babylonians (who had inherited the records of the Assyrians) when they took over the empire (Blenkinsopp 1988: 114). Yet those whose records they were are called Artaxerxes' ancestors. Not only do the writers of the letter make this association, they assume Artaxerxes makes it as well.

Rehum and associates then come to their climactic conclusion. They state plainly that if the reconstruction of the city is completed, the king will no longer have any share in Ebir-nari. It is difficult to judge at this historical distance how seriously this assertion would have been assessed by the implied reader. In the first place, the implied reader's understanding of the political situation some 40 to 140 years before his time may be quite imprecise. Second, there are varying estimations in the present day of how their warning should have been perceived. Some scholars maintain that it is a great exaggeration to declare that the Judeans could remove the entire province of Ebir-nari from under the king's control, even had they been so inclined (e.g. Throntveit 1992: 28; Fensham 1982: 74). Others point to the fact that there were several rebellions in the western portion of the Persian empire before and during the reign of Artaxerxes I and argue that it would not be far-fetched to think that a city like Jerusalem could make a significant contribution to a larger revolt in the area (Blenkinsopp 1988: 114). Of course, if the enemies of Judah are making a wild exaggeration, the king's response will tell the reader something about the king. On the other hand, even if the king had good reason to be nervous about such doings in Palestine, it is clear that his interest is expected to lie with preserving his empire, with no thought for what the narrator and implied reader understand to be the restoration of Judah after exile. In any case, the divergence of interest is patent.

Verses 17-19

The enemies appear to have been correct in their estimation of how to manipulate Artaxerxes. The king sends a report back to Rehum and his associates. He tells them that their letter was read to him and that he indeed had a search made in the records and found that from ancient times this city rose up against kings and fomented rebellion and revolt. The close correspondence of terminology between the letter of the enemies of the Judeans and Artaxerxes' response conveys the impression that he found exactly what they told him to find. The effect on the reader is not to conclude that Rehum and company were especially knowledgeable about the contents of the Persian archives. Rather it is that this group of people seems to have succeeded in directing the king to see the issue their way. The implication is

that the king is susceptible to influence. In Ezra 1 YHWH was able to stir the king's spirit so that he fulfilled YHWH's prior word through Jeremiah. In this episode the enemies of the Judeans are able to write and send a letter to the king so that he fulfils their desires. The king is portrayed similarly in both episodes. Interested parties prevail upon him to use the power at his disposal for their own ends. In the first case the use of power benefits the community of exiles, in the second it works against them.

The king himself, it seems, would rather that things not appear this way. Artaxerxes does add to their original wording. Rather than merely saying that a search was made (using the verb with an impersonal subject, matching the wording in the first letter), he reports that he gave an order which prompted the search. This contributes to the perception that the king wants to be seen as the one giving the orders. He takes every chance he gets to assert his rule. It is reminiscent of Cyrus in Ezra 1 (cf. 'all the kingdoms of the earth YHWH has given me', and the claim to be the deity's choice to build a temple for his people [v. 2]). But though the kings assert their sovereignty, the narrator reveals to the reader that others are pulling the strings in each case.

The king accepts the argumentation of the enemies. Since Jerusalem was rebellious in the past, he concludes, as they asserted, that it will necessarily be so again (cf. v. 21). Although there was no mention in the original letter of contemporary evidence of rebellion, the king does not question the conclusion of his officials. His concern is for preservation of his empire, and the suggestion of a threat to it is sufficient for him to take action. When the pronouncements of the Persian kings in Ezra 1 and Ezra 4 are compared in this way, it can be seen that the right to rule is the issue for the king in each case. Cyrus presented the rebuilding of the temple as the will of the god of Israel, thus it supported his claim to legitimate rule. The opponents argue that the building activity in Jerusalem will undermine the rule of the Persian king, and this is sufficient to prompt Artaxerxes to act in accordance with their wishes.

Verses 20-21

Two main interpretations of Ezra 4:20 are found in the secondary literature. In the first, Artaxerxes declares that powerful kings of Jerusalem (presumably Israelite or Judean) have exercised authority over the entire region of Eber-nari, receiving taxes from its inhabitants (Clines 1984: 81; Coggins 1976: 32; Batten 1913: 179). In the context this verse is understood to provide further proof that building activities in Jerusalem should be regarded warily. The other main interpretation takes Artaxerxes to be saying that powerful kings ruling over the entire region of Eber-Nari (presumably non-Israelite kings) have managed to rule over Jerusalem as well, receiving tax income from the city (Galling 1951: 69; Fensham 1982: 75-76). In the context, then, this interpretation reads the *waw* as adversative, and the verse is understood to stand in opposition to v. 19, that is, although Jerusalem has a history of rebelliousness, there have been those who were able to subdue it and extract taxation from it. The first interpretation would certainly show Artaxerxes to be firmly opposed to Judean independence, taking a very different view of the height of Israelite hegemony from that of the implied reader. This would tend to make the implied reader less sympathetic to Artaxerxes as a character. The second interpretation seems to commend itself, however. It is unlikely that Assyrian and Babylonian records would include records as far back as the time of Solomon. Even more significant from a literary standpoint, is the logic of the argument. Realising that there have been kings able to subdue the rebellious city and receive tribute by the force of their rule, Artaxerxes determines to do the same (Williamson 1985: 64). On this interpretation also there is a clear divergence of values between the implied reader and Artaxerxes. The days of Assyrian and Babylonian hegemony were a time of punishment and suffering in the eyes of the implied reader, yet Artaxerxes views them as the model he wishes to emulate.

Having confirmed the single stated premise of the argument of the enemies of the Judeans, the king adopts their faulty reasoning to reach the same invalid conclusion. From the fact that Jerusalem rebelled against imperial overlords in the past, he concludes that the permission of wall-building in the city is too risky. Artaxerxes certainly operated with no presumption of loyalty on the part of the

Judeans. Although those working on the construction are said to have come to Jerusalem from the land of their exile, the mere suggestion of rebellion is enough to inflame the king's suspicions.

The king continues with the rhetoric of power. There has been much discussion about the phrase 'until a decree is given by me' (v. 21; cf. Williamson 1985: 64; Böhler 1997: 217). Within the narrative, it appears to emphasise that the king wishes to maintain control over affairs. He recognises the possibility that there might be value at some point in rebuilding the city and its walls. But what he will not allow is for the inhabitants of Jerusalem to build on their own initiative. The main issue from Artaxerxes' perspective in this exchange of letters is the maintenance of his sovereignty. That sovereignty is threatened if the people of Jerusalem take matters into their own hands and put up a wall. Their action is to be stopped until such time as he himself may decide to pursue such a plan. It will be ironic in Nehemiah 1-2 when Artaxerxes does in fact decide to have the walls of Jerusalem rebuilt. At that point, again, he will be acting at the instigation of another, not on his own initiative. Although the Persian kings in EN consistently claim to be in control, their exercise of power is repeatedly the vehicle by which others, especially YHWH, achieve their aims.

Verse 22

There is further evidence that the king is following the path set out for him by the Judeans' enemies. Artaxerxes comes to the very conclusion those who wrote the original letter wanted him to. He continues to use their phrases (Galling 1951: 69), stating that if the Judeans are not stopped in their efforts, it will be to the detriment of 'kings'.

Some have argued that EN presents the Persian kings as supportive of the Judeans unless they are deceived (e.g. Galling 1951: 74). The argument has it that the instances in which the Persians further the Judean restoration show their supportive attitude and that this episode from Ezra 4 reveals that it is only deception that puts them off this mind-set. Elsewhere in the present study, the first part of the argument is repeatedly called into question. With respect to the second part, it must

be wondered in what way Artaxerxes was actually deceived in this episode. The data he was given was not incorrect. It is only the inference that was suspect, and he was free to evaluate the logic of it. Williamson finds it hard to decide whether the king has really come to his conclusion based on the evidence or whether bribed counsellors are behind his decision (1985: 63-64). The question is moot. The point in any case is that the king is subject to the influence of the enemies of the Judeans, and easily persuaded. 'The irony of the king's strictly enjoining upon the Samaritans their own dearest desire is reminiscent of the fine ironies of the tale of Esther' (Clines 1984: 82).

Concern for the Judeans themselves or their god does not enter the discussion. There is no mention of the will of YHWH or any other god in the exchange of letters. One might argue that this feature applies only to the characterisation of Artaxerxes, and not to the characterisation of the other Persian kings in the book. Even if this is true, the implications for the interpretation of the passages involving Artaxerxes later on are significant (Ezra 7; Nehemiah 2). When he is presented as seeking to support the Jerusalem cult and the teaching of Torah, and as concerned to obey the desires of YHWH, the implied reader is suspicious that Artaxerxes is using these concepts for his own purposes, and is not a sincere devotee of YHWH. Several elements have already been identified, however, which seem to argue that the kings are presented as a single character. Thus, it is more likely that the implied reader is presented here with the 'default' attitude of the Persian kings (cf. Sowers 1996: 48). When there is no divine intervention, the kings have no particular interest in Yahwism, are not favourably disposed toward the Judeans and are, in fact, easily turned against them.

Some would argue that the reason why there is no 'god-talk' in this chapter is because it deals with city walls rather than the temple, which would invite theological language (Duggan 2001: 63 n. 6). For the implied author, however, it is clear that the rebuilding of the city walls is an important aspect of the theological restoration of Israel. If Artaxerxes does not see things in this way, his view diverges from that of the implied author. Moreover, his understanding of the significance of the temple cult in Ezra 7 is rendered suspect. The most likely conclusion is that Artaxerxes has adopted the typical ancient Near Eastern royal perspective on such

matters. Once again, he does not appear to have any traits other than those generally associated with a particular class of people, and is effectively a type. Where assistance to the cults of subject peoples gains political points, this may be provided. But the structure of the empire that provides for income must be maintained above all.

Verses 23-24

The Judeans' enemies successfully use the king to attain their goal. Once Rehum and his associates hear the king's response, they do exactly what they wanted to do in the first place—stop the building. The king does not appear in this episode to be wise and well-informed. Rather, he appears to be a pawn manipulated to achieve the aims of the Judeans' enemies. His word is all-powerful, but others wield it as a weapon in their own battles.

The use of *בְּאַדְרִי* at the beginning of Ezra 4:24 has provoked a significant amount of discussion. It ordinarily means 'then' in a sequential sense (Rosenthal 1983: 40), and some tension has been felt regarding the way it connects vv. 23 and 24. The majority of interpreters understand it to connect v. 24 with v. 5 chronologically, viewing vv. 6-23 as a proleptic parenthesis.⁶⁷

Understanding the text in this way, a parallel is drawn between the actions of the enemies of the Judeans in Ezra 4:4-5, 24 and those of Rehum and associates in Ezra 4:8-23, and the results are presented as analogous (Clines 1984: 82). Just as Rehum and company later stopped the building of the city wall in Artaxerxes' reign, so the enemies were able to bring progress to a halt in Cyrus's reign. In both instances, the effect on the portrayal of the king is to show that the power of the monarch in the Judeans' favour may be nullified and may even be turned against them.

⁶⁷ On the phenomenon of resumptive repetition, see Williamson (1985: 57). A similar perspective on the text is gained through the concept of interscenic summary, see above, p. 37.

This chapter shows that the Persian kings are clearly against the independence of Judah. Nehemiah 9, on the other hand, will show that the community of returned exiles and, apparently, the narrator are for it. The kings will oppose anything that threatens their sovereignty. At the same time, one of the major themes of the narrative of EN is that there is no need for the community to compromise in order to experience YHWH's restoration. The narrative argues for the possibility of working within the constraints of Persian rule, but it does not argue for the preferability of Persian rule, except, to a limited degree, in comparison to Assyrian or Babylonian rule.

It emerges clearly here that the Judeans cannot rely on the Persian kings to bring about God's good purposes for them. The king's motives are never fully unambiguous, but they cannot simply be identified with those of the community. Thus, the suspense is heightened in chapter 5, where the implied reader cannot be confident that Darius will reaffirm the community's right to build. This will contribute to the sense that it was indeed the hand of God upon the community that produced a favourable decision on Darius's part (cf. Kidner 1979: 48).

Summary/Conclusion

The characterisation of the Persian kings continues in Ezra 3-4. The mention of Cyrus in Ezra 3 is in connection with the written version of the proclamation issued in Ezra 1, and it begins to emerge, in chapters 3 and 4, that it is the existence of the document itself, rather than any favourable disposition on the part of Cyrus himself, that is beneficial to the restoration process of the Judeans. Also, the role of temple-builder seems to migrate from Cyrus to the returned Judean exiles. Both of these factors tend to minimise the importance of Cyrus in the narrative; his contributions to the temple rebuilding begin to appear more as those of an unwitting agent than as those of a Near Eastern emperor. Coherent with this ironic role of the king are the instances in which others, both Judeans and their enemies, make use of his authority to further their own aims. In these cases as well, the Persian kings, both Cyrus and Artaxerxes, do not seem fully aware of how they are being 'used' by the others. This is so even though both of them clearly wish to appear to be in full

control of matters in their realm. The kings of Assyria are introduced as characters responsible for the occupation of Judah by people hostile to the returned exiles. This will become an important aspect of the characterisation of the Persian kings.

The encounters with the enemies, who are by their own admission foreigners brought to Judah by previous emperors, highlight some of the difficulties for the Judeans of living among, and under the rule of, foreigners. Within the domestic-foreign matrix, the Persian kings are placed squarely among the foreigners. Reference to the king's ancestors in such a way as to include Assyrian and Babylonian monarchs among them contributes to the impression that Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian rulers can be viewed as a somewhat homogeneous group. The Judeans' enemies represent themselves as willing servants of the Persian monarch. For his part, Artaxerxes makes it clear that the restoration of Jerusalem and the well-being of the city do not compare in importance with the receipt of tax revenue from Judah. The proleptic inclusion of the Artaxerxes episode provides a glimpse of the ordinary state of affairs within the Persian empire. That is, apart from divine intervention, the king's influence is as likely to be turned against the Judeans as it is in their favour. As elsewhere in the HB, life among foreigners is depicted as unpleasant, and the Persian monarchs are not portrayed as providing any exception to this rule.

The loyalty of the Judeans to the Persian throne is nowhere affirmed. The desire for independence, however, will be later, in the strongest terms. As the affair progresses in ch. 5, the Judeans do not assure the king of their loyalty, they merely assert their legal right to build the temple.

CHAPTER 4: EZRA 5

Verse 1

After the narrator has made clear that the work on the temple was brought to a standstill in Ezra 4, he is ready to describe how it was restarted and brought to completion in Ezra 5-6. He begins by mentioning the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. In Ezra 1:1 Jeremiah was named and his prophecy referred to but not quoted. Its substance was not made explicit. In Ezra 5 Haggai and Zechariah are named and their prophecies referred to, but these prophecies are not recounted in any way. Haggai and Zechariah seem to stand in the same role as Jeremiah did in Ezra 1. Their prophesying is said to be in the name of the god of Israel. The response of Zerubbabel and Jeshua is to 'arise', using the same verb (קוּם) as was used to denote the response of the heads of families in Ezra 1:5. It seems the narrator wants the reader to understand that once again the events about to follow have their first cause in the word of YHWH through his prophets. Just as such a word began the rebuilding in Ezra 1, so it will restart the building in Ezra 5.

The role of the king has changed from Ezra 1, however. In Ezra 5 YHWH uses his word to motivate the Judeans to action without using the king as a means. This is a significant observation with respect to those who argue that in EN YHWH speaks to his people through the Persian king (e.g. Japhet 1982: 73-74). In this episode, the Persian king is not involved at all in the restarting of the building project.

Verse 2

A further contrast may be seen in 5:2, where it is the prophets of God who help those rebuilding, rather than the king and the exilic neighbours, as in 1:1-11. The new neighbours have put their effort into hindering the rebuilding efforts, and the king has provided no help. The prophets of God are the only source of aid for the Judeans at this point.

It has been widely observed that there are no explicit references to Zerubbabel as a messianic figure in EN. This is often understood to imply that there is a

difference in outlook concerning messianic expectations between the book of EN and the books of Haggai and Zechariah. Bedford, for example, sees two 'faces' of the Judeans' view of themselves as a polity (2001: 263-64). He says the one face is visible in Ezra 5-6, where the king of the Judeans is portrayed as Darius. His permission allows them to rebuild the temple, which is necessary for them to become again a people under their god. According to Bedford the other face is visible in Haggai and Zechariah 1-8. In those texts the king will be Zerubbabel or, as Bedford correctly perceives, the earthly monarch of the house of David who will serve under the great king, YHWH.

There is little doubt that Darius himself would have subscribed to the view Bedford finds in Ezra 5-6. But it is not indisputable that the narrator of Ezra 5-6 actually takes such a view himself. According to the narrator, it is not Darius who restarts the stalled building. The prophets prophesy, and it is Zerubbabel along with others who actually arise to start the work. Zerubbabel is not given as prominent a place as he is in Haggai and Zechariah, but those books focus on prophecy and EN focuses on narrative historiography. Since Zerubbabel did not reign as king, the narrator does not explicitly depict him as one. But neither is he ignored. Of the few individuals mentioned in connection with the rebuilding of the temple in Ezra 1-6, Zerubbabel is as prominent as any. This acknowledges that Zerubbabel fulfilled one of the key messianic functions assigned to him in Haggai and Zechariah. It should further be noted that the fulfilment of messianic expectations associated with independence for Judah is connected in Zechariah 1-8 with the 'blotting out' of sin (Laato 1992: 159). This concept seems to be in tune with Nehemiah 9, where the prospect of Judean independence is linked to the removal of guilt. These considerations show that the view taken of these matters by the narrator of EN may not be so different from that evident in the books of Haggai and Zechariah. In fact, it would be consistent with the interpretation maintained thus far that the narrator wishes to depict events as operating on two levels: one that acknowledges the understanding common throughout the ancient Near East, and one that displays a distinctive theology. On the typical ancient Near Eastern view, the permission of Darius is needed for Judah to build their temple and become a people. On the more

theologically distinctive view, YHWH, conscripting the Persian king to help them, will reconstitute them as a people under their Davidic ruler, whom Zerubbabel represents. Zerubbabel's involvement in the temple reconstruction validates his messianic connection, but the narrative of EN also affirms that the messianic hopes have not (yet) been realised. Thus, the narrator allows for Zerubbabel's leadership in the temple rebuilding to be understood as a step along the way to the achievement of messianic hopes, while acknowledging that YHWH is employing the Persian king to bring about restoration as well. This clearly undermines the Persian king's authority in the narrative world, if not ultimately subverting it.

Verse 3

At the same time as the rebuilding is getting under way, Tattenai, an appointed official of Ebir-nari, Shethar-Bozenai and their colleagues come to the Judeans. This is reminiscent of the occasion in Ezra 4:2 where the enemies of the Judeans also arrived on the scene when construction work had commenced (Davies 1999: 32). The naming of two important officials and the disclosure that they are accompanied by several others also reminds the reader of Ezra 4:9ff., the correspondence between Rehum and Artaxerxes. These features create the expectation that something similar is about to happen again. The implied reader anticipates trouble for the builders (cf. Galling 1951: 68).

The officials come with questions. They ask the builders who gave them a command to build. Temple-building was an activity fraught with political implications in the ancient world, and permission from the proper authority for such construction was always essential. Their question could be understood either as a straightforward request for information or as carrying the implication of suspicion that the Judeans did not actually have authorisation to build. The immediately preceding narrative in Ezra 4 tends to support the latter interpretation.

Verses 4-5

Not only do the officials question the basis of authority for the building project, they also ask for the names of those participating. This clearly sets a tone of imminent danger in the passage.

Unlike the instances recounted in ch. 4, however, the builders are not stopped from working. The initial outcome is described by the narrator in an interscenic summary.⁶⁸ The wording specifically invites a contrast with 4:24: 'They did not stop them' versus 'The work ceased and was discontinued', with the same root (בטל) occurring twice in 4:24 and again in 5:5 (Davies 1999: 32). This favourable turn of events is attributed to the eye of their God being upon them. The phrase implies that God was helping them. The implication is that if not for God's providence, the inquisitors would have put a stop to the building. As it is, the narrative implies that there was every possibility that the building would be stopped after Darius had received the report of Tattenai. The implied reader knows that the Judeans had been given permission to rebuild by Cyrus, itself described as an act of God in ch. 1. But even the fact that they are allowed to continue while this state of affairs is verified is explained as a divine work. It is not enough for the Judeans to have the law of the kingdom on their side. Providence is still required for them to benefit from it.

It is, therefore, hard to agree with those who argue that Tattenai is not portrayed as an opponent to the Judeans in this chapter (Allen 2003a: 44; Blenkinsopp 1988: 120-21; Williamson 1985: 76). It has been pointed out that he did not stop the work until a reply was received from Darius. But neither did Rehum and his associates stop the work until receiving a reply from Artaxerxes. At the very least, it is impossible to dispute that the episode in ch. 5 emphasises the close scrutiny the Judeans were subject to under Persian rule.

The phrase 'eye of their God' likely contains some irony. A Persian inspector or investigator was known as 'the king's eye' (Klein 1999: 704). Tattenai and his associates are functioning in this role here. But God's eye counteracts the effects of the king's eye (Breneman 1993: 109). The Persian administrative structure,

⁶⁸ See above, p. 37.

including the king and his servants, is thus subtly set at odds with the rule of the God of the Judeans. Rather than making the Persian officials appear to have interests contrary to those of their monarch, the narrative of chs. 4-5 makes the Persian officials and the Persian kings appear to be ordinarily unified, with predictably undesirable consequences for Judean interests.⁶⁹

Verses 6-8

Again consistent with the analogy of ch. 4, Tattenai and the group associated with him write a letter to the king. This enhances the reader's expectation that they mean to achieve a result similar to what was narrated in ch. 4.

The way in which Tattenai refers to the building in the letter (and Darius's response to the letter) forces the implied reader to assume that the reconstruction had not been a high priority for the Persian administration during Cyrus's reign. Tattenai himself was apparently unaware of Cyrus's edict, since if he were aware of it there would be no point in asking for a search to be made in the archives of Babylon. As governor of Ebir-nari, he would have had access to official records relating to such matters if they existed. It is possible that the bribery mentioned in ch. 4 was so successful that even official documents pertaining to the rebuilding had been obliterated. The narrative is unspecific about how the situation came to be as it was, but it is clear that the idea of having the temple rebuilt in Jerusalem was a new idea to Tattenai and his fellow officials. Similarly, Darius's response gives no indication that he had any knowledge of Cyrus's decree before the archival search was carried out.

Verse 9

Many have followed the view of Rundgren (1958: 209-15) that the verb שאל indicates that a legal suit had developed between Tattenai and the Judeans. The evidence offered by Rundgren and others does not seem sufficient to establish that

⁶⁹ On the view that the Persian kings are supportive of the Judeans unless deceived, see above, p. 122.

formal legal proceedings had commenced. It does seem correct, however, to perceive that the question reflects an adversarial attitude, rather than a mere interest in receiving information.

Mention of 'those elders' in Ezra 5:9 has prompted a number of commentators to suggest that an earlier reference to them in the text has dropped out, possibly at v. 8. A more likely explanation is that the use of the demonstrative pronoun **הָאֵלֶּזֶר** has a pejorative significance, rather than requiring a textual antecedent (Barthélemy 1979: 505). This is similar to the understanding of 'that Sheshbazzar' in v. 16 proposed by several scholars (e.g. Clines 1984: 87-88). The effect is to contribute further to the atmosphere of opposition present in the activities and words of Tattenai and associates.

Verses 10-11

As Klein puts it, 'the desire of the investigators to report the names of the Jewish leaders to the king has an ominous ring' (1999: 704). As already mentioned, a number of features contribute to the impression that the investigators suspect they have discovered unauthorised activity. If they did not think so, the gathering of names would seem superfluous.

Tattenai claims to report to the king just what the Judeans said to him when questioned. The implied reader may wonder whether Tattenai can be trusted to tell the truth. Since he appears to have been unaware of the decree of Cyrus, however, mention of it is unlikely to have originated with him (v. 13). Furthermore, by the time his rendition of their speech is finished, the elders of the Judeans appear to have made a clever reply. Thus, it is likely that the implied reader understands that Tattenai has conveyed the substance of the Judean elders' response. From Tattenai's own perspective, the claim that Cyrus himself authorised the construction of the Jerusalem temple may have seemed far-fetched and sounded like a desperate attempt on the part of the Judeans. The straightforward approach would be to pass this information on to the king and request that a search for such a decree be made in the royal archives. When none would be found, the Judeans would have manoeuvred

themselves into inextricable difficulties. This is precisely the course of action Tattenai pursued.

As the implied reader encounters the reply of the elders as reported by Tattenai, it is unclear whether it can be assumed that the elders anticipated that their words would be reported to the king. In all likelihood they framed their speech to provide a reply primarily to Tattenai, rather than to the king. They would have been aware, however, that whatever they said could have been reported more widely, and that it could even get as far as the king himself. It is unlikely that they would have spoken much differently if they knew for certain that the king would be informed of what they said.

It is, therefore, of interest that they identify themselves as servants of the God of heaven and earth, with no mention of service or loyalty to the Persian king (Karrer 2001: 332). In terms of the text selected for inclusion by the narrator, it seems more than coincidental that the letter from Rehum and company to Artaxerxes began with the identification of the letter writers as Artaxerxes' 'servants', while the elders of the Judeans identify themselves as servants of the God of heaven and earth. In EN those who are designated by the word **עַבְדֵּי** in relation to foreign rulers are non-Judeans (Ezra 4:11; Neh. 9:10 [Pharaoh's servants]). When this designation applies to Israelites in relation to foreign rulers, the connotation is one of oppressive slavery (Ezra 9:9; Neh. 9:36). The sole exception is when Nehemiah identifies himself as Artaxerxes' servant in direct address to the king himself, a situation obviously requiring deferential speech (Neh. 2:5). Otherwise, Israelites are designated as servants of their God (Ezra 5:11; 9:11; Neh. 1:6, 7, 8, 10, 11; 2:20; 9:14; 10:30). Neh. 2:20 is a particularly relevant passage, since at that point the loyalty of the Judeans to Persia is explicitly called into question. The political implications of temples, coupled with the uncertainty concerning authorisation to rebuild present in Ezra 5, establishes that the Judeans' loyalty to Persia is implicitly called into question here as well. In both passages, however, the response of the Judeans is to assert allegiance to their God and remain silent concerning allegiance to Persia. The impression created throughout EN is the same as that created in microcosm in Ezra 4-5, namely, that the Judeans are to be perceived as servants of their God, in contrast

to others who are servants of foreign human rulers. It must be stressed that this emerges through the narrator's overall presentation of material. It is not merely the intention of any single character or group of characters in the narrative.

This certainly does not imply that the Judeans were bent on rebelling against the Persian kings, but it does introduce and sustain a tension in the mind of the reader between allegiance to YHWH and allegiance to the Persian throne. By identifying themselves as essentially servants of the God of heaven and earth, they acknowledge in effect that this is their primary allegiance. Their choice of words, 'god of heaven and earth', establishes the overall authority of their God (Smith-Christopher 2001: 314). Loyalty to Persia is not requisite for obedience to YHWH in the narrator's mind. Yet they walk a fine line in pointing out that authorisation for them to build this temple was granted by Cyrus.

Mention that the temple was built many years ago suggests that the elders wish to support the legitimacy of their rebuilding with the notion of the restoration of normality, as explained by Bedford (2001: 71).⁷⁰ They expect that establishing this connection will make any concerned parties more amenable to temple reconstruction. The desirability of a return to normality was a standard feature of ancient Near Eastern ideology.

The fact that the temple was originally built by a great king of Israel also contributes to the sense that restoring it would be a move in the direction of restoring normalcy. It should be noted that this is a very positive reference to Israelite kingship, not at all consistent with the argument of Dozeman, who sees the narrator giving a negative evaluation of Judean monarchs (2003: 462). In ch. 4, the negative evaluation originates in the mouths of the enemies of the Judeans, and is injudiciously repeated by Artaxerxes. The implied reader neither agrees with the enemies nor approves of Artaxerxes' response. In ch. 5, however, the positive evaluation is suggested by the words of the Judeans themselves, a group much more likely to have the sympathy of the implied reader.

⁷⁰ See also above, p. 78.

Verse 12

The elders must now explain how it came to be that the temple was destroyed. One very common reason for such destruction was reprisal for political rebellion. This is the view advanced by Rehum and associates in the letter in ch. 4. Indeed, other historical narratives in the HB concur that the reason Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple in Jerusalem was because the inhabitants of Judah rebelled against him. Such revelations hardly suit the delicate purpose of the Judeans at this point. The elders of the Judeans also believe, however, that the reason for the destruction had fundamentally to do with rebellion against their God. This is the explanation given to Tattenai. Because of the anger of their God, their ancestors were given into Nebuchadnezzar's hand, and he carried out the destruction of the temple and the exile of the people. The specific actions that angered their God and precipitated Nebuchadnezzar's deeds are left unspecified. The elders of the Judeans evidence a careful rhetoric designed to minimise the concerns of those who might be hostile to their interests. The impression left on Tattenai and, through his letter, on Darius is that the destruction of the temple was simply a matter of impiety (cf. Bedford 2001: 236). Their explanation that angering their God was the cause of the destruction of the temple would have been readily understood and accepted in the polytheistic milieu of the ancient Near East (Fleishman 1995: 93; Allen 2003a: 45; Block 1988: 129-61; Bodi 1991: 191-218). There is no implication that the elders must have thought Tattenai or Darius would adopt a specifically Judean point of view.

Despite the fact that the destruction of the temple is attributed to impiety and not political rebellion, there is still no statement of political loyalty to the Persians or their predecessors. Despite the fact that the narrative of EN places Judeans in situations in which their loyalty to the Achaemenid dynasty is in question, there is never any clear statement of such loyalty. This is curious if EN is to be understood as a pro-Persian document.

From a literary standpoint, the phrase 'he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar' invites comparison with Cyrus's claim in 1:2 that YHWH 'has given [him] all the kingdoms of the earth'. In both cases it emerges that when

YHWH gives such power to a king, he retains the ultimate sovereignty, and the one receiving the power effectively serves to carry out YHWH's purposes. The result for YHWH's people may be either judgment or mercy. The implied reader may also be expected to recognise that the deliverance of Israel into the hands of foreigners is a result of Israel's sin. This is explicit here and in Ezra 9:7; Neh. 9:27, 30, 37. From this angle, the ironic nature of Cyrus's declaration in Ezra 1 comes into view once again. The fact that he exercises rule over the Judeans as a result of their sin is never absent from the implied reader's mind. Yet in the midst of this situation, YHWH brings Cyrus to the throne and stirs him up precisely to bring about his good purposes for his people. This is the explicit view of Isaiah 40-55 and Ezra 9.

Nebuchadnezzar is more closely identified as the king of Babylon, and even further, as a Chaldean. The associations with Babylon mentioned earlier are present here. From one standpoint, 'king of Babylon' is the only reasonable epithet to attach to Nebuchadnezzar. Alternatively, it may be questioned whether there was need for any epithet at all, since other rulers are referred to in EN without them.⁷¹ 'Babylon' functions here as the name of the empire shared in common by Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus (cf. v. 13). They are distinguished by the further designation of Nebuchadnezzar as Chaldean, a specific kind of Babylonian king. Here 'Chaldean' separates them into destroyer and restorer; 'Babylon' links them in succession. By applying this designation to him, Nebuchadnezzar's associations with the destruction of the temple and the exile are brought to mind. Babylon is the realm linked to punishment, whereas Persia is the realm connected to God's mercy. The specification of Nebuchadnezzar as Chaldean is necessary, however, since 'king of Babylon' was in fact a title frequently used by Persian kings (Fleishman 1995: 93). By adding that Nebuchadnezzar was a Chaldean, the elders create some distance between him and the Achaemenids. He may have held the same title as his Persian successors, but the impression is left that he is somehow different, that circumstances were different for him than they are for the Persians. The Achaemenids need not

⁷¹ Cf. Ezra 4:6, 7, 10, although some maintain that Osnappar is not a king.

think that they should assume the role of destroyer as Nebuchadnezzar was called to do by the God of heaven.

Verse 13

Cyrus himself is referred to as 'king of Babylon'. This is the first time he has been called this in EN. One reason for this appellation is that this was a commonly used epithet for Persian kings at that time. Indeed, Cyrus is known to have used it of himself (*ANET*, 316). A second reason is that the elders wish to connect Cyrus to Nebuchadnezzar as his successor. This is how Persian kings wished to be seen (Blenkinsopp 1988: 114). By using this title the elders are acknowledging that the Achaemenids are the heirs to the Assyro-Babylonian empire. It is hard, however, for the implied reader to avoid seeing the close connection between Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus as kings of Babylon as an indication that Cyrus and his successors are of a piece with the Assyro-Babylonians. It is as if the succession of empires blends together into one (Berquist 1995: 24). They are all 'Babylon', servitude to whom is evidence of YHWH's judgment. As Grayson has stated, 'Biblical writers had good cause to hate the Babylonians after the Exile, and this hatred took the form of regarding them as the archetypes of evil' (1992: 776). If YHWH uses his sovereign power to bring about blessing through the 'Babylonians', that is exceptional.

The use of 'king of Babylon' also underlines the contrast with 'king of Israel' in v. 11. This opposition is similar to the one observed in the discussion of ch. 1, where Cyrus is 'king of Persia' and YHWH is 'God of Israel'. Cyrus's foreignness is emphasised in the eyes of the implied reader. He is not 'king of Israel', although it is clear to characters, narrator and reader that Cyrus and his successors in fact rule over Israel. Of course, this is not a concern for Tattenai or Darius, who are very well aware of the foreignness of Israel, and for whom it is testimony to the vast extent of the Persian empire. Thus, it is not an obstacle in the rhetoric of the elders' reply, but it contributes to the impression on the implied reader of EN as a whole.

Such considerations complicate the view of Karrer. She argues that the concept of kingship changed in Israel in certain periods of history. While this is almost certainly true, her explication of the concept of kingship reflected in EN

asserts that the Davidic dynasty had come to an end and that kingship had been handed over to the Achaemenids (2001: 351). As already mentioned, there is no doubt that the implied author of EN recognises the fact of Persian hegemony. What must be determined is whether the author's acknowledgment of this state of affairs is merely descriptive, or whether it can be taken to be prescriptive in some sense. It seems that Karrer concludes that EN prescribes an acceptance of the new order. But the observations above suggest that the new order may only be accepted temporarily as the status quo under YHWH's judgment. This is also the view explicitly put forward in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9. It may be compared with the message of Jeremiah 25, in which submission to the king of Babylon was a result of punishment, but was intended to be temporary.

Although the reader encounters their reply to Tattenai in Tattenai's letter to Darius, it is clear that from the beginning they insisted their right to build had come from Cyrus himself. Whether Tattenai's original question in v. 3 had been intended somewhat rhetorically or not, the elders answer it directly and literally, asserting that they did have such a decree. They do this despite the fact that their immediate motivation for building had come from God through the prophets. For those operating on the merely human plane, such as Tattenai and Darius, the reasoning is given in human terms. The narrator has informed the implied reader, however, that events are managed on the divine level. Moreover, the Judeans do not even request a decision from Darius *de novo*, as one might expect if they were confident of a supportive attitude on his part. They calculate instead that their best chance of success lies in basing their case on the decree that Cyrus issued. The entire project hangs on it.

The Judeans offer no explanation of why Cyrus would have done such a thing. Indeed, the question of Tattenai in v. 3, referred to also in v. 9, whether a straightforward request for information or an insinuation of wrongdoing, assumes that permission for such activity in the form of a decree was sometimes given. This is consistent with the interpretation of ch. 1 given above, where it was maintained that a decree such as that of Cyrus, while by no means an everyday occurrence, was

at the same time not unusual. The characters in the narrative all seem to understand that kings authorised such projects from time to time.

Karrer has argued that Ezra 5:11-15 provides the clearest expression of her thesis that what she calls the 'two sides' of the temple are integrated in Ezra 1, 3-6 (2001: 349). She maintains that the king is portrayed as the master of the temple's status, whether built or destroyed. In this respect she likens him to an owner or developer ('*Bauherr*'). From this side the temple is a kind of state shrine. On the other side, the temple is portrayed as the place of YHWH's presence for the Israelites. She asserts that the two sides can be seen to be integrated in Ezra 5 because the temple's existence is clearly connected to the king. There is little doubt that these two 'sides' to the temple exist in the narrative and that the narrator is aware of them. But the question that must be asked is whether the narrator wishes to give priority to one over the other. The two sides as described by Karrer correspond very well to the two planes already identified on which the action of the narrative occurs. It has already been seen that the narrator subordinates the action on the merely human plane to that on the divine. Thus, it would seem that there is not a simple integration of the two sides of the temple, but rather a subordination of the king's view to that of the Judeans. The Judeans in their reply to Tattenai, of course, emphasised the 'state shrine' view for rhetorical purposes. The matter is rather like the phenomenon of deferential speech; there may be a significant difference between the private opinion and the one expressed in public. As noted above, however, the lack of any mention by the Judeans of loyalty to the Persian throne is still somewhat surprising.

Verse 14

Sheshbazzar is mentioned primarily to maintain the connection with the actions of Cyrus at the time of the original decree. The Judeans' rhetorical strategy is based on showing that their right to rebuild goes back to Cyrus himself. Not only did Cyrus issue a decree, he also demonstrated his support for the project by having the temple vessels brought out of the temple in Babylon and given to Sheshbazzar. Here it is mentioned that Sheshbazzar was also made פֶּהָה. The term has a broad range of

meaning (Clines 1984: 88), and the point of bringing this up is to assert that he was given official authority by the king. This contributes to the case they are making that they have been proceeding in accordance with the wishes of Cyrus.

Verse 15

Cyrus's instructions to Sheshbazzar are tersely recalled: 'Take these vessels, put them in the temple, let the house of God be rebuilt on its site'. The elders aim to show that Cyrus's instructions are being followed exactly. They have authorisation for all that they are doing.

The mention of the restoration of the temple vessels also contributes to the theme of restoring normality. This is also the case with the rebuilding of the house of God 'on its site' (Clines 1984: 88).

Karrer claims that the Achaemenid kings are here portrayed as taking up the legal succession to the Davidides (2001: 344 n. 172). Once again, the rhetorical aims of the speakers must be considered. The Judean elders recognise that the Persian administration values the restoration of normality. Their goal is to show that Cyrus was bringing about such restoration when he ordered the reconstruction of the temple, and that they are merely following his orders. Neither Tattenai nor Darius is likely concerned about legal succession to the Davidides. The connection between the great king of Israel who built the temple in the first place and Cyrus, who ordered it rebuilt, is about justifying the rebuilding in terms of the restoration of normality, not about establishing a succession of kings. Thus, since the implied reader understands the rhetorical situation, there is no need for confusion about this matter. On the other hand, if one wishes to insist that ancient Near Eastern peoples did not distinguish between politics and religion, it is probably true that the Persians would not have made such a fine distinction. For Cyrus to order the temple rebuilt would be for him to function in a sense as the legitimate successor of the Israelite who built it in the first place. But the implied reader is still able to distinguish Cyrus's (and implicitly Darius's and Tattenai's) point of view from the narrator's, as in ch. 1. The narrative portrays the Judeans as the builders of the second temple, and the Persian kings as caused, by YHWH's intervention, to enable them to do so. The reply of the

Judean elders is necessarily phrased in terms consistent with the view the Persians take of matters. This is essential to achieve rhetorical persuasiveness. It does not follow that the narrator or the Judeans themselves adopt the Persians' view. As elsewhere in the narrative, it is more likely that the narrator understands the Persian kings to be part of the succession of foreign rulers whose dominion over the Judeans is part of their punishment, but whom YHWH has prevailed upon to act in specific ways that contribute to the restoration of Judah. This seems considerably different from saying that they are legitimate successors of the Davidides.

Verse 16

The Judeans conclude their response by saying that Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God and that from then until their own time it has been under construction. This verse raises a number of questions but, at the same time, seems to allow the elders' rhetorical strategy to be seen most clearly. The sequel to the account of Cyrus's edict is different than it was in ch. 1. In the first chapter, the next event was the return of the temple vessels to Jerusalem, with a large number of Judean exiles accompanying or following them. Subsequently it was reported that the exiles laid the foundation of the temple. Named as prominent among this group are Zerubbabel and Jeshua, with no mention made of Sheshbazzar. The difference between these accounts is consistent with the interpretation that the elders of the Judeans are trying to emphasise continuity between Cyrus's decree and their own actions (similarly Böhler 1997: 261; Fensham 1982: 85; Bedford 2001: 236). They do not introduce new characters in their version, as the narrator did in his. The individual who was given the temple vessels to return to Jerusalem is also said to have laid the foundations of the temple. The current Judeans identify themselves as the direct heirs of this endeavour, carrying on the work in unbroken succession. The intent to show continuity seems clear.

Overall, the elders are portrayed as rather wary. They do not presume that they will receive a sympathetic hearing. Life under Persian rule is presented as fraught with uncertainty over whether a fair hearing will be given and justice done. It is of little practical value to argue that the uncertainties were generated by Persian

officials deceiving the king, who was otherwise favourably disposed towards the Judeans. As Karrer has pointed out, the situation portrayed in EN is that the Judeans were largely able to deal with the king only *through* his officials (2001: 99). It is more accurate to conclude that the Persian king is depicted as easily influenced by others, as likely for ill as for good, and that his beneficial actions toward the Judeans are specifically a result of divine intervention. The resulting context breeds insecurity for the Judeans and makes clear that such blessings as they receive come only from their God.

The relationship between the Judeans' explanation of the destruction of Jerusalem and the one given in chapter 4 is instructive. Certainly there is rhetoric at work in both cases; the enemies wanted to emphasise the rebellion against kings and the Judeans want to hide any suggestion of such. But the implied reader thinks that ultimately the Judeans are not only clever but also right. The juxtaposition of the two versions of the history illustrates the fact that the narrative is disclosing two perspectives constantly. There is the mundane perspective according to which kings converse with their subjects and make decisions, and there is the supramundane perspective according to which Israel's experience is determined by their obedience or disobedience to YHWH.

Verse 17

The transition marker, וְכַּעַן, indicates the shift from the report of the elders' speech to the direct address of Tattenai and associates to Darius (Clines 1984: 89). This seems a more natural interpretation than that the elders themselves suggested that a search be made in the treasury for record of the decree. In fact, the wording of the recommendation, to see whether a decree was issued, suggests that the matter is in doubt. If the Judeans made the request, it would more likely be to see whether a *record* of the decree could be found, or something similar, since they are firm in their belief that the decree was issued. As it is, Tattenai has heard the Judeans' reply and feels that the matter can be resolved in the most straightforward way by finding out if there is any documentary evidence that their story is true. Tattenai is, of course, careful to use the appropriate language in his letter, qualifying his suggestion with 'if

it pleases the king' and asking the king to send his will or decision in the matter (cf. Williamson 1985: 80; Clines 1984: 89). The king is under no obligation to act on a suggestion from Tattenai. He may have the search made or not as he wishes, and he is free to determine the course of action he wishes taken on the matter of the rebuilding, if any at all. This emphasis on the king's sovereignty sets the stage for the ironic resolution of the potential crisis according to the will of YHWH, by means of the king's decision.

The implied reader realises the precariousness of the Judeans' position. They have staked all on the fact that Cyrus issued the decree and put it in writing (Ezra 1:1). If no record is found of this decree, they will appear to be lying. They have not appealed to the satrap for permission to rebuild, as was later done at Elephantine, nor to Darius himself. The narrative creates suspense at this point. Clearly the existence of the decree was no longer common knowledge.

The suggestion of a 'library search' (Eskenazi 1988a: 59) is also somewhat ominous. Although the events of ch. 4 belong after the letter of ch. 5 chronologically, their placement before ch. 5 literarily allows them to serve as 'background' for it. When Rehum and company prompted the king to check the archives, they wanted him to find evidence that Jerusalem was rebellious. They obtained their desired result. Now in ch. 5, Tattenai steers the king to the record books again. This time it is to see if a single specific item can be found. It is easy to imagine that it could have been misplaced or lost, or that those carrying out the search could overlook it. The chances that an unhappy outcome will result for the Judeans seem even greater than they were in ch. 4.

Summary/Conclusion

The events of Ezra 5 contribute still further to the characterisation of the Persian kings. The narrator begins with a note about how the word of God through the prophets, as in Ezra 1, once again provides the impetus propelling the restoration forward. This time the Persian king is completely bypassed in the process of motivating the exiles to rebuild. The introduction of Zerubbabel as a key figure in the reconstruction process, consistent with his portrayal in Haggai and Zechariah,

allows the implied reader to continue to view events from two perspectives. From the Persians' point of view, Darius must give his permission for rebuilding to continue, and, as emperor, the temple is officially his project, by which he allows the Judeans to become a people again. From the narrator's point of view, it is under Zerubbabel that YHWH's people will be reconstituted and the temple rebuilt; the permission of Darius is merely a pragmatic detail, secured by YHWH's intervention. The Achaemenid king continues to be used by YHWH to achieve his own ends and does not appear to be aware of the full significance of matters.

The encounter with Tattenai and his associates emphasises the close scrutiny to which the Judeans were subject under Persian rule. Although a number of scholars have seen Tattenai as a fair-minded and conscientious official quite different from Rehum and his associates in Ezra 4, the narrative explains that the reason why he did not stop the building efforts was that the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Judeans. The details of the narrative, both in Ezra 5 and 6, make it difficult to sustain a meaningful contrast between Rehum and Tattenai. Thus, the responses of Darius and Artaxerxes are not seen to be dependent on the qualities of the officials who implore them. It follows that the commonly stated position that the Persian kings are portrayed in EN as supportive of the Judeans unless they are deceived, is without support. In this case Darius, as Artaxerxes in ch. 4, did exactly as requested and, but for a surprising turn of events, as the reader will see, would not have found the vital memorandum. The complete lack of awareness of Cyrus's decree on the part of the Persian authorities implies that it was never an item of high priority for the Persian government, consistent with the interpretation given of it earlier as primarily a propagandistic piece. Tattenai's potential interference with the rebuilding comes about in his role as an 'eye of the king'. The protection of the Judeans resulting from YHWH's eye constructs a contrast between the king and YHWH. It also provides a contrast with the preceding episode of Ezra 4, in which the Judeans' efforts were frustrated when YHWH did not intervene on their behalf. These factors carry on the opposition established between YHWH's values and those of the Persian regime. They also underline the tenuousness of receiving benefit from the Persian king, even when it has been ordered in a decree.

The Judean elders' reply to the questioning of Tattenai is carefully calculated to assert their right to rebuild the temple. Naturally, they mention those details that are likely to induce the king to be supportive of them. An examination of their speech indicates that they speak in terms a typical ancient Near Eastern king would understand. They present the issue of rebuilding the temple as one of carrying out the wishes of the earlier king, Cyrus. They expect Darius to be concerned with a return to normality and to understand the previous destruction of the temple in terms of the anger of their god. Their hopes are pinned on the existence of the document issued by Cyrus, rather than on the good will of Darius. It is clear that the Judean elders do not regard Darius as one who may be presumed to act favourably toward them or their religion. They do not mention the fulfilment of prophecy or the stirring of Cyrus by YHWH. They regard Darius as a typical ancient Near Eastern despot. Their care in framing the issue in terms amenable to such a character is consistent with a reading that assumes that they understood Cyrus's decree in Ezra 1 to be largely propagandistic. This tends to support the interpretation of Ezra 1 advanced earlier. Since the elders, in contrast to the enemies in Ezra 4, do not explicitly profess allegiance to the Persian king, but do profess allegiance to YHWH, a tension is established between loyalty to the Persian monarch and loyalty to YHWH. This is also in contrast with the elders' brief mention of Israelite kingship, which is completely positive. The depiction of the Persian king as a typical Near Eastern monarch of the period is also supported by the reiteration of the Persians' connection with the Babylonians, achieved through the use of epithets. It appears to the implied reader once again that the Persians and Babylonians alike were used by YHWH as tools to achieve his purposes, the Babylonians to bring about punishment of Judah and the Persians to mitigate that punishment with restorative acts. The foreignness of the Persian kings is not allowed to slip from view.

Since the Judean elders clearly attempt to use rhetoric to achieve their aims, it is certain that the implied reader is familiar with such techniques. This strengthens the argument that finds a comparable practice in the decree of Cyrus in Ezra 1. Finally, the abundance of rhetoric also creates the perfect climate for irony. The dual

perspectives from which the unfolding events of the narrative have been viewed are sustained in the account of Ezra 5.

CHAPTER 5: EZRA 6

Verse 1

Darius does exactly what Tattenai suggests. He issues a command to have the search made for record of Cyrus's command. The search is executed in the treasury archives in Babylon, as requested. This is parallel to what was stated in 4:19, that Artaxerxes followed Rehum's suggestion to make a search concerning Judah's history of rebelliousness. Darius also appears to do as suggested to him by his subordinate. The implied reader knows that Cyrus actually did issue an edict, but is equally aware that establishing proof of that fact is completely out of the Judeans' control.

Verse 2

The relationship between v. 1 and v. 2 is interesting. Some translations (e.g. NIV) appear to allow the possibility that Ecbatana in v. 2 should be considered part of an area, Babylon, referred to in v. 1. Understood in this way, the discovery in Ecbatana was within the parameters set out in the letter of Tattenai. It is more likely, however, that 'Babylon' refers to the city, which was the administrative headquarters of the satrapy of Babylon and Eber-Nari (Allen 2003a: 52, and most commentators). Thus, the conjunction at the beginning of v. 2 should be taken as adversative. Verse 1 relates that Darius had a search made in Babylon, in the treasury archives where Tattenai had suggested and where the sort of record he was looking for would reasonably be expected to be found. Verse 2 states, however, that a scroll was found in Ecbatana that proved to be decisive in the matter at hand. Why the scope of the search was expanded is not told. The voice of the verb also changes from the impersonal active 'they searched' in v. 1 to the passive 'it was found' in v. 2. Further, Galling has seen in the phrase וכן־כתִּיב בגוֹה evidence that the record was contained within a larger document written on the scroll (1937: 30ff.). These factors contribute to the impression that the discovery of the scroll in Ecbatana was providential and came about only as an indirect result of the prescribed search. There is thus a strong

suggestion that once again it is divine intervention that allowed events to transpire to the benefit of the Judeans.

Verses 3-5

Verses 3-5 appear to quote the record that was discovered. It seems that this portion of text was included in the reply Darius sent to Tattenai, since in vv. 6-12 Darius addresses Tattenai directly. Accordingly, the record or memorandum is written in an official style, sometimes obscured by modern translations. For example, it begins 'In the first year of King Cyrus, King Cyrus issued a decree . . .' The purported decree of Cyrus refers to the house of God as a place where sacrifices are offered, an entirely appropriate description to appear in a Persian document since Persians did not practise animal sacrifice in their own worship (Klein 1999: 708). It goes on to give brief notice of the dimensions the temple should have. The instruction to maintain the foundations connects with the widespread belief in the ancient Near East that it was important to restore temples to their original state (Vanderhooft 1999: 50). All of this contributes to the impression that Cyrus dealt with this matter as one among many in his dealings with the various peoples in his empire (Fensham 1982: 87). The tone is bureaucratic; although it involves a religious matter, it does not use theological language.

Many writers have noted that the decrees of ch. 1 and ch. 6 are not identical (cf. Bedford 2001: 112-13). Indeed, this is obvious. A considerable amount of discussion has ensued concerning which, if either, of the two versions may be authentic, and what the relationship between them may be. Within the narrative, the memorandum of Ezra 6:3-5 serves as proof that the edict in Ezra 1:2-4 was issued. Clearly the implied reader is unconcerned that the wording of the two texts differs, or that the precise range of subjects addressed in them is not identical, since there seem to be no consequences of this in the narrative, and no attempt is made to reassure the reader about these matters. For the narrator and implied reader, the text in Ezra 6:3-5 reflects the written version of the original decree alluded to in Ezra 1:1. Although Cyrus may have expressed himself through the oral proclamation of ch. 1 in terms that were amenable to translation into Hebrew as we find them there, the written

version of ch. 6 gives a more official-sounding rendition. This enables the reader to perceive a distinction within Cyrus's own modes of expression. Ezra 1 represents his 'public' expression, using the name of the god of his subject people and encouraging them to travel to take part in the reconstruction, appealing for material support for them from their neighbours. Ezra 6 represents the 'private' view, transacting business, specifically addressing the details of what is to happen without concern for rhetorical appeal. The references to God are only generic references to the 'house of God', another way of saying 'the temple'. But the issue is made more complex by the fact that according to the literary conventions of the day, the narrator may be understood to have reproduced material selectively in both Ezra 1 and Ezra 6. This effect may be compounded in ch. 6 by the possibility that Darius, too, may have been selective in his inclusion of material from the memorandum. Therefore, much of the discussion extant in scholarly literature about the authenticity of the decrees and their relationship to each other would apparently seem irrelevant to the implied reader. In the end, the main function of 6:3-5 is to show that the Judeans were proven to be right in their claim.

The mention of financing for the temple from the royal treasury sounds surprising to many modern readers. Indeed, this detail was not mentioned in ch. 1 either (although 3:7 referred to an authorisation the returned exiles had to obtain wood from Lebanon). In the earlier account, the narrator drew attention to the request for the Judeans' neighbours to support them in the rebuilding venture. This was done to present a parallel with the exodus from Egypt. That feature may not have found its way into the official memorandum. At any rate, in the official document preserved in the archives, Cyrus did have mention made of state funding for temple reconstruction. This detail becomes an important factor in Darius's response to Tattenai.

The fact is, however, that Persian financing of local cults was not unusual.

It cannot be argued that such generosity would have been unparalleled. De Vaux, "Decrees," 92-93, adduces numerous instances of just such support for the cults of their subjects during the reigns of Cambyses and Darius, while "the discovery of bricks bearing the stamp of Cyrus in the Persian repairs to the Eanna at Uruk and to the Enunmah at Ur proved beyond any doubt that they were state undertakings supported by public funds" (Williamson 1985: 81).

To this may be added that Blenkinsopp has described how the Udjahorresnet inscription also reports Persian financing of local cults (1987: 409-21). Whether such funding was actually extended to the Judeans is not central to this study. What is germane is that the implied reader would set the events narrated in EN within the context of other similar instances. Assisting local cults in order to gain political advantage would be a familiar concept.

The provisions afforded by Cyrus, however, do underscore a point made earlier. Bedford observes from a historical standpoint that if Cyrus actually did include the Jerusalem cult among those he helped to re-establish, his assistance had little impact (2001: 152; similarly Blenkinsopp 1988: 125). This is, in fact, the way the situation is portrayed in EN as well. A meagre beginning was put to a halt by the opposition of the enemies of the Judeans until Darius's second year. It must be thought either that Cyrus's command was more about public display than about achieving actual construction or that since they were at such great distance from the actual seat of government during his reign the assistance of Cyrus was of little practical value to the Judeans.⁷² The tangible contributions of his edict were to allow a number of exiles to return to Judah, to enable a start to be made on the rebuilding and, most important of all, by putting his decision in writing, to allow the restarted project in Darius's time to be viewed as a legitimate endeavour. The written record of his edict was his greatest legacy from the standpoint of EN (cf. Karrer 2001: 335).

The willingness of Cyrus to use state resources for reconstruction of the temple provides an interesting counterpoint to Artaxerxes in ch. 4, who was concerned with losing income from Jerusalem and the region of Ebir-nari. The Persian kings in EN are assumed and depicted to be very concerned about increasing and preserving their wealth. Here the effect of the narrator's order of presentation may be seen.⁷³ The implied reader knows on the basis of ch. 1 that Cyrus was moved to his generosity by

⁷² The later disclosure of facts reflects substantially on a character through his earlier speech, in a similar way to when the character's speech follows the information in the narrative. See above, p. 52.

⁷³ See above, p. 50.

divine action. Although Cyrus's behaviour was not unprecedented and could be understood as primarily politically motivated, its placement after Artaxerxes' course of action in Ezra 4 highlights the factual contrast between the two behaviours. While both appear to be acting for political purpose, the resulting extension of favour to Judah is ultimately the result of divine initiative. Without YHWH's intervention, Persian politics operate to Judah's detriment.

The instructions to return the articles of gold and silver and deposit them in the temple in Jerusalem, and especially the emphasis on returning the collection 'to its place' (לְאִתְּרָהָ, v. 5), further corroborate Cyrus's interest in restoring normality.

Nothing is quoted of the instruction of Cyrus that only YHWH's people (i.e., Judeans) should participate in the rebuilding. This may have been omitted in the account of Ezra 6 because it was not germane to the context, but the absence of any mention of it supports the interpretation given above on ch. 4, namely, that the Judeans' insistence that only they were supposed to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, without help from those of different ancestry, was a convenient way of understanding the edict that reflected their own purposes more than an actual emphasis intended by Cyrus himself.

In fact, in the memorandum of Ezra 6, Cyrus does not mention who is rebuilding the temple at all. The verbs are in the passive voice. Only the last verb in v. 5 is an active verb in the seemingly impersonal second person (Bickerman 1946: 251). This suggests that from his perspective, or for official purposes, he takes for granted that he is seen as the builder. This would be consistent with the standard ancient Near Eastern ideology, although kings were generally careful to be explicit about it. As has been noted, however, the narrator regularly displaces him from this role with the Judeans.

Verse 6

Darius's response to Tattenai and his cohorts is literally that they should keep themselves 'at a distance from there' (Gunneweg 1985: 103, 109). This language has been interpreted by Rundgren as a technical legal term meaning 'the accusation is rejected' (1958: 213). His explanation is that Tattenai had brought a legal charge

against the Judeans. Others do not find this entirely convincing, and have suggested other legal analogies. Whether a legal context is implied or not, the king's reply seems quite harsh. It is hard to imagine that Darius did not perceive Tattenai and company to be essentially opposing the rebuilding effort. If he thought they were merely making an inquiry to ensure all I's were dotted and all T's crossed, he would simply have affirmed that documentation of the Judeans' claim had indeed been found. The wording in v. 6, however, clearly implies that Tattenai and his group are in an adversarial relationship, legal or otherwise, with the elders of the Judeans. In fact, if there were no adversarial relationship understood here, there is little point to including this episode in the narrative. Its purpose in context seems to be to show that the whole project was in danger of being stopped more or less permanently but was ultimately allowed to continue.

Verse 7

Darius's concern, it emerges, is for the work on the house of God to continue. Having found the memorandum of Cyrus, Darius grants permission to continue the work. Within the narrative, he appears to be upholding and supporting the decree of Cyrus rather than having a particular interest in helping the Judeans. Another way of putting it is to say that any help he gives the Judeans appears to be motivated by his desire to see Cyrus's orders carried out.⁷⁴ Karrer notes that the narrative makes it appear that Darius's actions are a carrying-out of Cyrus's command (2001: 99, 335).⁷⁵ Once again, it may be noted that this is a historically plausible scenario, and the implied reader may have been aware of Darius's frequent attempts to appear to be a true successor to Cyrus (Boyce 1982: 124-28). In such a situation, wherein Darius is eager to be seen to follow in Cyrus's footsteps, it is very possible that he would even exceed Cyrus in the support he gives to the temple rebuilding. This is, in fact, what

⁷⁴ The consistencies between Cyrus's memorandum and Darius's own instructions may be explained by the 'framework of presentational dynamics' (see above, p. 52). Darius includes the memorandum as part of his letter precisely because it provides the basis for his decision.

⁷⁵ The differences between the speeches of characters are often used to produce contrasts, cf. above, p. 42. In this case, however, the similarities between the texts produced by Cyrus and Darius make them look much the same.

occurs in Ezra 6. How much of the background about Darius and his relationship to Cyrus was known to the implied reader is unclear. What is clear is that Darius appears to be motivated primarily by a desire to have Cyrus's decree carried out, rather than any personal concern for the Judeans themselves. By confirming the edict of Cyrus, Darius means to show that he is a legitimate king over Judah (Bedford 2001: 235). His motivation is thus similar to what was seen for Cyrus in ch. 1 (Berquist 1995: 57).

It must be remembered, however, that the memorandum itself was discovered because of the intervention of YHWH. Thus, the decision of Darius, based on his knowledge of the previous command of Cyrus, is a result of YHWH's activity. This is the crucial factor producing the different result from that found in Ezra 4. In that instance a search of the royal records produced an unfavourable result for the Judeans. The similarity of that episode to the one involving Tattenai led the implied reader to be apprehensive about the outcome of the latter.⁷⁶ In the present case, by contrast, the archival research 'happens' to provide data that leads to a happy outcome. Although the focus of the hunt was Babylon, a scroll 'was found'—serendipitously, on the face of it—in Ecbatana.

Of course, it has also been noted that the Persians apparently felt that royal decrees were unalterable (Dan. 6:13; Est. 8:8). On this ground, Darius may have felt he had no choice but to comply with the earlier edict. This interpretation would also pre-empt the notion that Darius was acting out of benevolence for the Judeans.

Darius also gives a further imperative to Tattenai and company in v. 7. The meaning seems to be for them not to interfere with the work associated with the house of God. This is further confirmation that Darius anticipated Tattenai's intention as being to put a stop to that work.

Once more, Darius refers to building the temple on its site, emphasising again the concern for re-establishing normality (Galling 1961: 67-96).

Ever since Cyrus's mention in Ezra 1:2 that he had been appointed to build a house for YHWH in Jerusalem, the subjects used with the verb 'to build' have either

⁷⁶ On the use of prolepsis to shape expectations, see above, p. 50.

been impersonal or designated the Judeans as the builders. This is true regardless of whether the verb occurs in the narrator's words or those of a character. This feature is unusual in the ancient Near East, since kings ordinarily were careful to portray themselves as the builders of temples. The rhetorical effect on the implied reader is significant: the Judeans are the builders of this temple, not the king.

Verse 8

Darius instructs that financial support be given from state resources to the Judeans for the rebuilding. The wording contributes further to the sense that Darius perceives an adversarial relationship between Tattenai and the Judeans over this issue. He does not simply delineate the funding to be given. Instead, he continues his discourse begun earlier, in which he instructed Tattenai and his associates to 'keep at a distance' and not interfere, by telling them what they *are* to do. It seems that Darius looks on this situation as having something of the nature of a personal disagreement. Since he speaks so emphatically, his language seems to assume that Tattenai wanted the work to stop. This is also sustained by his explicit instruction that the support itself not cease.

The liberality of Darius's provision is not unusual when compared to other known instances (Allen 2005: 125; de Vaux 1972: 92-93; Berquist 1995: 53). By underwriting the construction costs it appears that he was merely reinstating the terms of Cyrus's original decree, which the reader knows was issued at YHWH's prompting.

Darius's instruction that the financial provisions be given to the elders of the Judeans without interruption or, perhaps, without any time limit (לֹא לְבַטְלָהּ; *HALOT* II, 1832) corresponds to the use of the same verb in 4:21, 23, 24; 5:5. Either translation proposed here would have significant meaning for the literary context of EN, since the narrative has indicated that the elders of the Judeans were interrupted from their work, but also that after a period of time, the edict of Cyrus was largely forgotten and therefore became ineffective. The section from ch. 3 to the end of ch. 6, and especially from ch. 4, has highlighted the theme of opposition to the rebuilding, centring on the desire of the enemies of the Judeans to bring it to a halt.

In this verse, Darius decisively determines that the building will *not* be stopped. Of course, Darius the character is unaware of the wording to be used later in the letter to Artaxerxes and in his reply, and used by the narrator in 4:24; 5:5. The concept of reversal based on the use of **בטל** is apparent to the implied reader, but not to the character Darius.

There is clear evidence here of YHWH's intervention in what happens.

Texts dating to the reigns of later Persian kings do confirm a pattern of Persian religious tolerance and noninterference in the cultural traditions of subject peoples. But in return—and this is essentially a Persian innovation—the temples were obliged to pay taxes to the Persians in kind. Food, livestock, wool, and laborers were regularly requisitioned by the Persians from their subordinate temple communities, which were expected to support local officials of the empire with food rations (Leith 1998: 379).

The implied reader, living during or after the time of the later Persian rulers alluded to by Leith, would recognise the hand of YHWH in the reversed flow of materials from state to temple. Later in the narrative (Nehemiah 9), it will become clear that the Persians were indeed requiring such payments from the Judeans. But even there the narrator avoids the implication that Persian assistance for the temple came at the price of Persian taxation.

Verse 9

The interest Darius displays in the details of the Judean cult is explicable in terms of the ancient Near Eastern belief that the correct procedure had to be followed in order not to anger a specific god (Fensham 1982: 90).⁷⁷ This also helps to explain the generous terms of support. Just as he and other Persian kings were informed by practitioners of specific cults concerning their requirements (de Vaux 1972: 91-92), so in all probability Darius was informed by Judeans at his court in this instance. Even if the provision described in EN did not correspond to historical reality, the

⁷⁷ Readers can be expected to bring their knowledge of historical characters to a text. See above, p. 33.

implied reader would understand this as an instance of this practice of the Persian monarchs.

Darius adds that there is to be no 'negligence' in supplying the materials needed by the Judeans for the practice of the cult. The word שָׁלוֹ also appeared at Ezra 4:22, where Artaxerxes warned against negligence in making the Judeans cease from their work on the city walls. It is possible that this was standard language in imperial decrees, but a fine reversal is achieved, with the Persian king admonishing diligence to aid the Judeans in ch. 5 in contrast to the situation in ch. 4. Once again, the change is understood by the implied reader as due ultimately to divine influence.

Verse 10

Support for the rebuilding of the temple was based on a desire to see Cyrus's earlier instructions brought to completion. The provision on behalf of the daily sacrifices is motivated by a slightly different desire which Darius now discloses. The king envisions a state of affairs in which the god is placated by the appropriate offerings, in conjunction with which prayers are being said for the king and his sons. The request for prayer on behalf of the king and his offspring is attested in the Cyrus Cylinder, and the Elephantine papyri record the promise of the Jews in Egypt to pray for the king at all times if they are granted permission to rebuild the temple there (*AP* 30). In effect, sacrifices offered on the king's behalf are used as something of a bargaining tool in that correspondence (Bolin 1995: 131). In light of this, Darius's injunction that prayer for the king occur in the Jerusalem temple does not indicate a special interest on his part in the Judean cult. The implied reader understands that the polytheistic Persians wanted to ensure the goodwill of all the gods as far as possible.

Thus, it is unmistakable that Darius has made ample provision for the rebuilding of and the daily worship in the Jerusalem temple. But rather than this being evidence of a benevolent attitude towards the Judeans, the narrative implies that it is attributable to other factors. The discovery that Cyrus had ordered the temple rebuilt was determinative for Darius. His concern that the god of the Judeans

(among others) be placated and implored on behalf of himself and his family stood behind his further financing of the cult.

Bickerman claims that this prayer for the welfare of the ruler constituted the recognition of his legitimacy in Jerusalem (1946: 268). If so, it shows that a similar intent was at work in Darius's case as was recognised in Cyrus's original edict to rebuild the temple in ch. 1. But if the implied reader interprets matters in this way, he again sees a divergence between the motivation of the Persian kings and the results celebrated by the narrator. A comment of Smith-Christopher is apropos here: 'If the Jews were so sanguine about such prayers, where are they in the biblical tradition?' (2001: 315). The narrator sees to it that Darius's interests are discernible, but seems to be completely uninterested in reporting whether Darius's ultimate aims were achieved. For the narrator the importance of the rebuilding lies elsewhere than in the realisation of Darius's goals.

Verse 11

The penalty clause in v. 11 is much more explicit than the mild warning in Artaxerxes' letter to Rehum (4:22). Apparently such clauses were common in ancient Near Eastern laws and treaties (Blenkinsopp 1988: 127). The Behistun inscription, for example, contains a penalty aimed at Darius's future successors (Kent 1953: 132). In the examples available to modern scholars, the penalty clauses were for those who would change a particular command of the king (Halpern 1990: 120). In the present context, both kings and peoples are brought into the scope of the penalty (v. 12), and it is said to apply to those who violate the decree, rather than to those who change it (Williamson 1985: 72). Whether these features seem unusual to the implied reader or not, they do contribute to the overall impression that Darius anticipates possible resistance to his instructions, and they are consistent with the interpretation maintained in this study that Tattenai and company intended to stop the rebuilding rather than merely ascertain its legitimacy.

Following hard on the heels of the instruction to pray for the king and his offspring, the penalty clause appears motivated to protect the king's interests more than those of the Judeans. Indeed, the directive to impale the offender responds to

his interference with the prayers on behalf of the 'life' of the king. It is life for life. The offender's house is also destroyed and a beam pulled from it to execute the impalement. The house of God in Jerusalem was to be a place that supported the life of the king. Anyone who takes this away from him will see his own house taken away and used to take away his life. Thus, it is both house for house and life for life. These details further the impression that Darius frames the issue in terms relating to him personally, rather than to the Judeans. Of course, as before, the narrator is happy to report this as God's assistance to the Judeans, Darius's own and different agenda notwithstanding.

Verse 12

It is entirely possible that v. 12 would be seen by most ancient Near Eastern readers as typical rhetoric. 'The god who has caused his name to dwell there' does not give the impression that Darius is acquainted with this god. The familiar similar expression in Deuteronomy (e.g., 12:21; 14:24; 16:6, 11; 26:2) includes the proper name 'YHWH'. Darius does not even refer to the God of heaven, as he had earlier (v. 10), and as was mentioned in Tattenai's letter. This may be coupled with the observation that the phrase as it occurs in Deuteronomy is always used to designate the place, not the God, as in Ezra 6:12. The similarity of Darius's words to the Deuteronomic phrasing has often prompted the conclusion that a Jewish editor has either fabricated or altered this part of the decree (e.g. Klein 1999: 710). Richter has recently argued, however, that the formula לשכן שמו שם is an idiomatic expression with well-attested cognates in Akkadian and Aramaic for claiming an object or property (Richter 2002). This is not to say that the language would have been taken lightly, but since it fits the pattern of expression commonly used, Darius is not depicted here as a Yahwist or as unusually sympathetic to Judean cultic concerns. If these observations are correct, they provide further evidence for the general understanding advocated in this study, namely, that the Persian kings are portrayed in EN as speaking in conventional terms and being motivated by well-known concerns, but that the narrator sees the work of YHWH behind these actions, initially aiming at

a result identical to that intended by the king at the human level, but with a significance ultimately different from that anticipated by the monarch.

Darius clearly envisions a future in which he or his successors maintain firm control over Judah. No king or people is to violate his decree. Prayers for the Persian king's family are to ascend to this god forever, as they were to deities worshipped across the empire. The intent on Darius's part is not that the Judeans be allowed to conduct their worship freely as seems best to them, but rather that it be done in such a way that their god is pleased and Darius himself is blessed as a result. This is what emerges from the portrayal of Darius in this passage. Since this is the narrator's portrayal, it follows that the narrator understands that, in general, the Judeans will only be able to achieve those goals which are not at odds with the political aims of the Persian king as long as they remain within his political structure. The narrator celebrates those occasions on which YHWH has intervened to bring about some element of restoration for the exiles, but the hope of fully inheriting the land promised to the descendants of Abraham (Ezra 9:11; Neh. 9:8, and apparently taken for granted as background throughout the narrative) seems to be outside the Judeans' grasp as long as they are subject to Persian rule.

The threatening penalty clause appended by Darius functions to guard his authority. It is a way of saying that disobeying his commands will not be tolerated and will produce grave consequences for any who should dare. The expected result is that all will do as he has said. Within the narrative of EN, however, the function of this clause is effectively to put an end to the opposition that had been in place since Ezra 4:5. Although the decree of Cyrus had existed all along, the command to rebuild now had 'teeth'.

A further comparison may be made between Darius in ch. 6 and Cyrus in ch. 1.⁷⁸ Both invoke the god they identify as having a house in Jerusalem. Cyrus justifies his decision to have the temple rebuilt by claiming that he has been so appointed by this god. By doing this he asserts his right to rule over Judah. Darius

⁷⁸ Comparison between the speeches of characters usually centres on content. See above, p. 42.

orders that the rebuilding be continued and summons the god who lives in the temple to act as enforcer of his will by overthrowing any who disobey and destroy the house. Neither of them has had direct communication with this god, according to the narrator. Both have effectively placed this god in their service as a means of bolstering their own authority. The narrator allows the aims of the Persian kings to be viewed in this way, but is more interested in how the acts of the kings bring about restoration for Judah on the occasions described in the narrative.

Accordingly, this is now the second time that a Persian king has made an enormous contribution to the restoration of Judah in EN. In both cases, the implied reader understood that the king was interested primarily in enhancing his own political status, Cyrus by asserting his divine selection as ruler and temple-builder, and Darius by upholding the decree of a predecessor and enjoining prayer for his well-being as ruler as part of the cult liturgy. At the same time, the implied reader is able to see how both Cyrus and Darius have a limited, polytheistic perspective on the Jerusalem cult, and at best speak better than they know. Their effectiveness in bringing about restoration for the Judeans according to YHWH's will is attributed to divine intervention.

In the letter to Artaxerxes in ch. 4, the enemies of the Judeans assumed that he would be very concerned about royal revenues. They were correct. By playing on his fear of lost income, they swayed him to suspicion of rebellious intent brewing in Jerusalem. The letter of Tattenai and associates in ch. 5 assumed that Darius would be concerned about the observance of royal prerogative with respect to temple construction. Once again, they were correct. Had the Judeans not actually had authorisation from Cyrus to build, Darius would have been expected to order the discontinuance of building activity. Tattenai was obviously unaware of any such authorisation, and since the work had stopped for a long time, he likely did not know it had ever been underway prior to the resurgence linked to Haggai and Zechariah. Thus, he was probably sceptical about the claim of the Judean elders. The reason Tattenai's letter brought such a different outcome from that of Rehum had little to do with the king's sympathies for Judah. What made all the difference was the fact that a decree of Cyrus authorising the building *was* discovered. On the basis of the newly

uncovered evidence, Darius's commitment to royal prerogative in temple construction led him to come down strongly on the side of supporting the project. Thus, the reader is able to see why the king did what he did and does not mistake his behaviour for an attitude of benevolence toward Judah.

There may be a kind of irony, of course, in the emperor's redirection of tax income to the construction of the temple and supply of its cult. This may be seen as a policy in tension with Artaxerxes' great concern to avoid loss of such income in Ebir-nari. The willingness to forego the revenue in ch. 6, however, is motivated by the desire for the temple to function as testimony to the Persian king's reign over Judah and to have the god living there placated and implored on the king's behalf. From this perspective the temple functions as a 'state shrine' (cf. Karrer 2001: 344-45) and is naturally supported with state funds.

Verse 14

As the narrator gives notice that the temple was completed, it should be observed that it is the elders of the Judeans who are said to finish building this temple (בְּנוּ וְשִׁכְּלְלוּ). The wording places them in a position corresponding to that of the 'great king of Israel' with respect to the first temple in Ezra 5:11. This is another instance in which the Persian king is displaced by the Judeans in temple construction.

In summarising the result of Darius's letter, the narrator reminds the reader that progress in the building came through the prophecy of Haggai and Zechariah. The priority of the prophetic word is reaffirmed, as at Ezra 1:1; 5:1. Arguments have been made for taking this reference to the prophets as part of an *inclusio* with Ezra 5:1 (Clines 1984: 95). The mention of the command of God may function in a similar way, but may also form an *inclusio* with Ezra 1:1 (Duggan 2001: 63-64). The reference to the prophets Haggai and Zechariah point toward an *inclusio* with Jeremiah in Ezra 1:1. All of these connections serve to highlight YHWH's sovereignty in the narrated events.

The word for YHWH's decree, דִּכְרִי, is the same as that used for the decree of the king. MT points the word differently in the two cases, however. Most commentators have assumed that this is an attempt to make some distinction between

the two, rather than allowing the impression to stand that a human king could issue an order with the same level of authority as YHWH (Klein 1992: 712; Blenkinsopp 1988: 128). The narrator has already established a distinction between the two respective levels on which these characters operate. The order of God through the prophets is not identical with the order of the king in Ezra 5. Therefore, the wording of Ezra 6:14 does not likely mean to say that the order of God and king is one and the same. The use of the same noun twice actually emphasises this distinction (cf. Blenkinsopp 1988: 151). The text seems to set forth a scenario in which the Judeans received commands from two distinct sources of authority. The reader is invited to consider how the rebuilding fulfilled the command of YHWH and the command of the Persian king. The two commands stemmed from different motivations and interests, yet produced the same tangible product.

The singular 'decree' is attached to three Persian kings, Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, as though together they issued a solitary decree. This is, in effect, what the narrator is expressing. His purpose for telling about the edict of Cyrus in Ezra 1, the letter from Darius in Ezra 6, the rescript of Artaxerxes in Ezra 7 and the letters of authorisation from Artaxerxes in Nehemiah 2 is to show that all of them contributed to the restoration of Jerusalem. Each of them contributed in a different way to the restoration, and they are presented to the reader in such a way that the conventional interpretations associated with such royal actions in the ancient Near East could be assumed (Berquist 1995: 120). But they are part of a narrative about how YHWH used conventional activities to achieve his distinctive purposes.

The idea that the royal decrees function as one decree is supported by the fact that the title 'king of Persia' is used in the singular after the names of three kings. The epithet applies to all three kings but is stated only once. Just as they are portrayed as issuing one decree, so are they together viewed as playing one role (Duggan 2001: 62). This is comparable to the observation that in the books of Chronicles David and Solomon are considered a unity in setting up the temple and instituting its cult (e.g. 2 Chron. 7:10; Braun 1973: 515). With respect to those activities, they function as virtually a single character. So in EN Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes function as a single character with respect to the reconstruction of the

temple, and the concept is brought to the surface textually by the wording of Ezra 6:14.

The reference to Artaxerxes is probably proleptic. Strictly speaking, it could be interpreted to refer to the fact that Artaxerxes' instructions in Ezra 4 were not contravened and that the Judeans were able to complete their work without contravention of any Persian ordinances. One of the problems with this view is that the building of the temple was completed before Artaxerxes issued his order to stop work on the city walls. Realising that a reference to Artaxerxes must be proleptic, therefore, makes it seem more likely that mention of him in Ezra 6:14 is connected to his rescript in support of the temple cult in Ezra 7 (cf. Ezra's remark in Ezra 7:27 that the king is glorifying the temple) and, especially, to his later authorisation of Nehemiah's project to repair the walls of Jerusalem.

Eskenazi has argued that the narrative of EN understands the rebuilding of the house of God to include the rebuilding of the city (1988a: 56-57). She sees the limits of the house of God extended to include the city of Jerusalem. Her interpretation is supported by the statement in v. 15 that the temple was completed during the time of Darius. The narrator is aware that the actual construction project that was completed in v. 15 was not helped along by any decree of Artaxerxes. Thus, v. 14 must have a larger project in view. While she may have overstated her conclusion, she appears to have correctly observed certain features of the narrative that point in this direction. It is quite appropriate to note that in Ezra 6:14 the Judeans are said to complete their 'building'. This allows the unexpressed direct object of the verb to be understood to include more than the physical temple itself. In this context the building may well include the city walls. On such a reading, the inclusion of Artaxerxes makes perfect sense.

The title 'king of Persia', as at 1:2-3, stands in contrast with 'the God of Israel'. It is apparent that the emperor is not undertaking work on behalf of his own god, but on behalf of the god of one of his subject peoples. Although the commands came from differing perspectives, that of the God of Israel and that of the king of Persia, the single result was the completion of the temple by Judean elders.

Verses 15-21

The rest of ch. 6 relates the celebration of the completion of the temple and the Passover. This section also contributes to the characterisation of the Persian kings by not mentioning them as participants in the celebrations. Although they made decrees providing for the re-establishment of the Jerusalem cult, there is no indication in the narrative that they rejoiced with the Judeans over the successful enactment of their orders. Of course, they would not have been expected to be personally involved in such festivities. But this tends to confirm the reading advanced in this study, in which the Persian kings are portrayed as acting in full accordance with expectations current in the ancient Near East. Their non-involvement at the end of ch. 6 shows that their decrees likely were also motivated by standard practices.

Mention is made of the people of Israel appointing the priests and Levites to their tasks (vv. 16-18). This role belonged to the king in Chronicles (1 Chronicles 23-25). The Persian kings are clearly not taking the place of the Davidic kings in EN. They are supplanted by the Judeans themselves.

It should also be noted that the narrative of Ezra 1-6 concludes with mention of the celebration of Passover. This reminds the reader of the similarity of the situation of the returnees to that of the Israelites who fled Egypt in the exodus (Throntveit 1992: 35-36). It may also be linked to the earlier celebration of Passover in Palestine at the end of the wilderness journey. The mention that some of the surrounding peoples separated themselves from the impurities of the peoples of the lands and joined them is reminiscent of the non-Israelites who joined the Hebrews in Exod. 12:38. Even the use of the name 'Israel' may have been chosen to heighten this association. Just as the beginning of the section Ezra 1-6 contained the motif of the second exodus, then, so is it also present at the end.

With respect to the exodus from Egypt, the goal of that exodus was the establishment of worship on Mount Zion, according to Exod. 15:17-18. Ezra 6 celebrates the re-establishment of worship at the same site. The parallels lead the reader to think of the king of Persia as being in a role similar to that of the Pharaoh of Egypt. Both the Pharaoh and the Persian kings were said to have had their inner beings worked upon by YHWH. Both allowed the Israelites to leave the land where

they were being held and travel to Palestine. Both 'commanded' the Israelites to take the appropriate animals and worship their God (Ezra 1:2-4; 6:9; cf. Exod. 12:31-32). Both expressed a desire that the Israelites' worship result in their own well-being (Ezra 6:10; Exod. 12:32). The major differences in EN are that the Persian king does not display the same hostility toward the Judeans as Pharaoh did toward the Israelites and that the Judeans do not achieve autonomy from Persia as the Israelites did from Egypt. The former difference is portrayed as a happy turn of events (cf. Ezra 6:22), and the latter gives rise to disappointment, expressed most clearly in Neh. 9:32-37.

Although the Israelites celebrate the Passover, there is no mention of prayers said for the king. This does not mean that none were said, but it shows that what was a priority for the king was not a priority for the narrator. Once again, the gap between the perspectives of narrator and character is apparent. It is impossible to sustain an interpretation that the Persian kings are portrayed as worshippers of YHWH. The narrator has reiterated that only those who separate themselves from the uncleanness of the other peoples qualify as Yahwists. In Ezra 4:2 the reader was introduced to characters who claimed to worship YHWH, but the mere claim was shown to be insufficient to establish the fact. There can be no question that the Persian kings are regarded by the narrator as no more legitimate Yahwists than the enemies in Ezra 4:2, regardless of the rhetoric they may use.

Verse 22

The last verse of the chapter provides an instance of an explicative statement by the narrator. He provides the reader with the reason for the joy of the Judeans. Overt explanations of this kind are comparatively rare in HB narrative in general and in EN in particular. The effect is to give the narrator's evaluation of a situation.

The phrase **והסב לב עליהם** has prompted several renderings (cf. NIV; NRSV; Blenkinsopp 1988: 131). The root **סבב** in the hiphil stem is used in several instances in the HB with the meaning 'to change' (e.g. to change a name, 2 Kgs. 23:34; 24:17; 2 Chron. 36:4). It is also used with the object **לב**, as in Ezra 6:22, at 1 Kgs. 18:37, where Elijah speaks of YHWH changing the hearts of the Israelites such that they

wish to serve him again, rather than Baal. In Ezra 6:22, then, the point is that YHWH has brought about a 'change of heart' in the king.

The precise nuance of לָעַן is debatable. Possible shades of meaning include 'over', in the sense that the king was ruling over them; 'on account of', in the sense that YHWH brought about the change for their sake; 'concerning', or 'with regard to', with the implication that the change of heart had to do with them; 'towards', viewing the change as being favourable. Whichever meaning is chosen, it is clear that the change of heart had something to do with the Judeans, who are here referred to as Israelites. The following clause provides further specification. The change was expressed in the king's willingness to help the Israelites in the work on the house of God. This reiterates what Ezra 1-6 has established consistently. YHWH intervened in affairs to bring about a change of heart so that the king willingly helped the Israelites build the Jerusalem temple. This welcome change has been connected solely with the rebuilding of the temple. There is no evidence that the king has otherwise taken a generally favourable attitude toward Israel. Rather, he has willingly chosen to help them rebuild the temple, and this is attributed to divine intervention. Whereas previous foreign rulers only grudgingly allowed Israel to establish the worship of YHWH in Jerusalem, such as Pharaoh, or destroyed the temple, such as Nebuchadnezzar, here there is a change of heart to willingly support the re-establishment of the cult.

A parallel may be recognised in Exod. 14:5. In that text Pharaoh and his officials also have their hearts changed toward the people (of Israel) after having let them leave Egypt. The verb and preposition used are different from those in Ezra 6:22, but the sense seems much the same. It is not the case that Pharaoh had become favourably disposed toward the Israelites and was now changed back. Rather, the change had mainly to do with what he intended to do to the people. So here the king has his heart turned with respect to them such that he acts in a way he would not have, had his heart not been turned.

The designation 'king of Assyria' seems surprising to modern readers. To this point in the narrative, it has only been used of Esarhaddon in Ezra 4:2. The first question to be answered is who this phrase refers to in Ezra 6:22, since the Assyrian

empire was by that time long ended. The most likely reference seems to be to Darius, since, in the context of the narrative, he is the most recent royal agent who has clearly helped Israel in its work on the house of God. This invites examination of the possibilities regarding what the significance would be of linking Darius with Assyria.⁷⁹ It was noted above how Ezra 6:14 referred to Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes as 'king of Persia' in the singular and spoke of 'their' decree, also in the singular. The effect observed was to highlight the way in which 'the king of Persia' appears to be a single role played by characters with different names. Rather than being treated as individuals, they together function as a stock character, a type. This may well be continued at v. 22. The 'king of Assyria' would then be another way of referring to this role in the narrative. This is consistent with the earlier observations of how the Persians are understood to be the successors of the Assyrians and Babylonians. As Cyrus was called king of Babylon at Ezra 5:13, so the epithet 'king of Assyria' is added to the nomenclature of the Persian kings here. The complexity of the Persian king's role is reflected in the multiple titles used for him.⁸⁰

The title 'Assyria' is linked within the narrative to Esarhaddon, who brought foreign peoples to Palestine, who in turn eventually created significant opposition to the temple rebuilding. Thus, the king of Assyria is a figure who has worked against the best interests of the Judeans, indirectly opposing the rebuilding of the temple. In this sense, the reader may see a reversal represented by the actions of the three Persian kings, if they are also seen as Assyrian kings (cf. Klein 1999: 713). In other HB literature, the king of Assyria is typically understood to be a feared enemy.

[T]he literary process, and so the coming to terms with Assyria, continued in time well beyond the initial moment of contact with Assyria—indeed, beyond the period when Assyria itself was in existence. Assyria thus becomes in its 'otherness' a metaphor, whose significance endures precisely because it can help to explain the other Assyrias—for example, the Neo-Babylonian state of Nebuchadnezzar II—that take its historical place in Israel's horizon (Machinist 2000: 166-67).

⁷⁹ The narrator's attitude toward a character is often reflected in the choice of terms used in direct characterisation. See above, p. 37.

⁸⁰ See above, p. 39.

There are few, if any, instances in which the king of Assyria is portrayed as helping the Israelites. With respect to the temple in Jerusalem, in fact, 2 Chron. 28:20-21 speaks of Tilgath-Pilneser of Assyria coming against Ahaz and 'harassing' (צָרַר) him, instead of 'strengthening' (חִזַּק) him. The explanation of this description is said to be that Ahaz took from the house of YHWH as well as from his own possessions and those of his officials and gave to the king of Assyria, but it was of no help to him. In EN the Israelites express the view that their time of need (צָרָה) has continued from the time of the kings of Assyria to the present (Neh. 9:32-37; the noun occurs in v. 37). But Ezra 6:22 points out that the king of Assyria 'strengthened their hands' (חִזַּק יְדֵיהֶם) to aid them in the work on the temple. This represents a significant reversal ('change of heart') with respect to the temple on the part of the king of Assyria. Therefore, it is very understandable that the narrator of EN would refer to actions aiding the rebuilding of the temple as evidence of a changed heart on the part of such a king. But if the Assyrians were associated with destruction and hardship, and the Persians associated with provision for the reconstruction of the temple, the identification of the two through the epithet in Ezra 6:22 is provocative. Indeed, within the narrative of EN itself, the only explicit mention of Persian royal opposition to Judean interests is the proleptic reference to Artaxerxes in ch. 4. The identification of Persians with Assyrians, then, reflects the narrator's tacit point of view, brought to explicit expression only rarely in the narrative. In his view, the Persian king is the successor to the Assyrian (and Babylonian) king and scarcely to be differentiated from him in the main. What the narrator marvels at is that this (Assyrian/Babylonian/Persian) king has suddenly taken an interest in helping with temple reconstruction, and this is understood as evidence of YHWH's own hand in bringing about restoration of the Judeans from their exile and all it signified.

Another reason for referring to the Persians as the successor of the Assyrians has to do with the formal characteristics of their decrees. According to Harmatta the edict of Cyrus has more affinities with some from the reign of Assurbanipal than with any other group of documents (1974: 31-32). Thus, Cyrus and his successors even sounded like Assyrians to their subjects. Bedford has noted that if one assumes

that Judah was politically important to Cyrus (a possibility that Bedford doubts historically), then his normalisation of cultic affairs there 'would be viewed not as a new initiative but rather as the adoption of an earlier policy pursued by certain Neo-Assyrian monarchs which engendered favour with devotees of the indigenous cult while simultaneously expressing the authority of the great king over local cultic affairs' (2001: 138). In the context of EN, then, the implied reader could well recognise Cyrus's actions in Ezra 1 as similar to the old practices of the Assyrians. Since Judah was a minor group within the empire (Bedford 2001: 140-41), its treatment as though it were a major group would provide further testimony of the divine intervention behind the event. Not only would Cyrus's actions be understood as explained in the discussion above on ch. 1, but the connection with Assyria would be strong, and this connection is made explicit at Ezra 6:22. Just as the deportations and killings in the past were also traditional behaviour but understood as YHWH's specific judgment on Israel, so the restoration of the temple stands in the line of traditional behaviour but is seen as YHWH's specific blessing on Israel.

The link between the Persian kings and the Assyrian kings gives added meaning to mention of the Assyrian king in Ezra 4:2. Esarhaddon is said to have brought the enemies of the Judeans to Palestine. The narrative of Ezra 1-6 has shown that the successors of the Assyrians, the Persians, have also brought people to Palestine, in this case, the Judeans. The implied background, of which the reader is expected to be aware, is that imperial rulers move people about their empire at will, for their own purposes. In the days of Esarhaddon, various peoples were moved into Palestine to serve the king's designs. Now, many years later, the Persians have brought about a migration of exiled Judeans to Jerusalem and area. This, no doubt, also serves the interests of the kings. But in this case, the narrator recognises the event as a gracious act of God. The reader is again reminded of the human and divine planes upon which history unfolds.

A further implication of the connection between Persian kings and Assyrian kings relates to these two perspectives from which events may be viewed. According to Isa. 10:5-7, YHWH sent the king of Assyria against people as punishment, but the Assyrian king, even in bringing this punishment, did not have

the same intentions as YHWH. It was argued earlier that in the narrative of EN the Persian kings effectively do YHWH's bidding but do not have the same intentions he does. The link between Persia and Assyria in Ezra 6:22 provides support for this argument (Breneman 1993: 122-23; McConville 1986: 208).

The willingness of the king of Assyria to encourage the Israelites in the work on the temple ('strengthened their hands') provides a clear contrast with the enemies of Judah, who strove to discourage them ('weakened their hands') (Klein 1999: 713). The Assyrian king thus functions as an enabler for the Israelites to overcome the obstacle presented by the enemies. Interpreted in this way, the king of Assyria in Ezra 6 is parallel to the neighbours in Ezra 1. Both are said to provide assistance to the Judeans under the same idiom (cf. Ezra 1:6). But the enabling from the Assyrian king is a result of YHWH's work on the king's heart. And the assistance of the neighbours results from Cyrus's proclamation, which was also the result of YHWH's work on his inner being. Here the implied author has employed similarity on the levels of linguistic sense (the idiom), plot (order by the king to build the temple in Jerusalem) and theme (YHWH's prevailing influence) to produce a very effective parallel between the two kings.⁸¹ Cyrus and Darius are thus strikingly similar. For the purpose of the narrative, they are virtually identical characters.

It should be observed that the king of Assyria helps the Israelites with the work on the house of God. The Israelites are presented as the ones with the responsibility for the work, and the king is helping them. This is a major departure from the role ascribed to kings in accounts of temple construction, both within the HB and in other ancient Near Eastern literature (Eskenazi 1988a: 52-53). The king, therefore, is portrayed as not occupying the role other kings occupied with respect to the temple and cult. Although he is the all-powerful emperor, and undoubtedly saw himself as occupying the traditional roles (cf. Cyrus's claim that YHWH had appointed him to build a house for him, Ezra 1:2), the narrator does not place him in quite the usual role. This is further evidence that the implied reader is to perceive a difference between how the king sees things and the way they 'really are'—that is, how the

⁸¹ See above, p. 51.

narrator sees them. This understanding is further supported by the fact that the king does not personally participate in the cult in any way. He does not appoint the priests and Levites to their duties, as noted above, and is completely absent from the celebration at the completion of the building. In contrast to 2 Chron. 7:10, where the people celebrated because of the good done to David and Solomon and the people Israel, in Ezra 6:22 the celebration is over the good done to the people Israel alone, and this good consisted in how YHWH prevailed upon the king to act on their behalf.

Clines has captured the significance of Ezra 6:22 as reflecting the narrator's approach to his story:

The implication is that all that has been narrated in between [from the beginning of Ezra 1 to the end of Ezra 6] has been the activity of God, however much its causation and outworking may seem to have developed on the purely human plane. A story that could have been told simply in terms of imperial policy (ch. 1), national feeling (ch. 3), petty provincial feuding (ch. 4), bureaucratic oversights (ch. 5), and royal generosity (ch. 6), is only fully told as a story about the action of God. He is the one who has 'stirred up' Cyrus (1:1), 'stirred the spirit' of the returning exiles (1:5), continued his covenanted mercies (3:11), raised up prophets to encourage the people (5:1), set his eye upon the elders of the Jews (5:5), 'turned the heart' of Darius toward them (5:22) [sic], and brought about the completion of his temple (5:14) [sic] (1984: 98).

Summary/Conclusion

In Ezra 6 Darius responds by doing exactly as Tattenai has requested, appearing to be subject to the influence of others, including those hostile to the Judeans. But it is through divine intervention, rather than a direct result of the king's action, that the crucial document is found. YHWH's involvement is seen to supersede, rather than strictly coincide with, the king's.

The memorandum of Cyrus sounds purely bureaucratic, again consistent with the assumptions the implied reader has about Near Eastern kings as a type. It portrays him as concerned with the return to normality rather than sincerely interested in the worship of YHWH for its own sake. The provision of funding from the royal treasury for the building costs, contained in the memorandum, is not particularly unusual. The fact the Israelites had not benefited from it contributes further to the impression that the project was not of genuine importance to Cyrus. But it becomes an important feature in Darius's renewed support. The two levels on

which the action of the narrative proceeds are evident here also. The instruction to return the vessels to their places is part of the concern for a return to normality. There is no mention in this version of the edict that only Judeans could participate, confirming the earlier understanding of their claim as 'using' the edict to suit themselves. YHWH is not mentioned by name. The lack of concern with YHWH in the memo of Ezra 6 tends to confirm the rhetorical nature of the language of Ezra 1 and the detection and conveyance of irony on the part of the narrator.

Although reconstruction began during Cyrus's reign, and he had the temple vessels returned to their place, it was the fact of putting his decree in writing that was ultimately decisive for the completion of the project. This was almost certainly not foreseen by Cyrus when he had the memorandum written up, so he again appears as an ironic character used by YHWH. Darius, for his part, seems to be motivated primarily by a concern to appear the true successor to Cyrus. This is the apparent motive also for his liberality in providing for the construction, which finds parallels in other historical instances. He is more concerned about his own status and the proper functioning of the empire than about the well-being of the Judeans. Darius also demonstrates interest in the re-establishment of normality and the avoidance of offending gods, similar to other ancient Near Eastern kings. His choice of words contributes to the unusual impression throughout the narrative that it is the Judeans rather than the Persian king who are building the temple. Although that is not likely Darius's intent in his letter, the narrator seems intentionally to deny this role to the Persian king, once again depicting him as an ironic participant in events. Similarly, his use of *בטל* and *שלו* contributes to an irony apparent only to the reader. In this category also should be placed the seemingly 'Deuteronomic' phrase of Ezra 6:12, since it simply reproduces a well-known Near Eastern idiom while enabling the implied reader to see a double meaning from the narrator's standpoint. Darius betrays another interest in the temple rebuilding in his request that sacrifices and prayers be offered on behalf of himself and his family. This aligns with the usual ancient Near Eastern theology that sought safety via the placation of as many gods as possible. This, along with his desire to preserve his authority, also explains his threat of capital punishment against any who would interfere. The gap between the

interests of the narrator and those of Darius is apparent in that no such prayers on the king's behalf are ever mentioned.

The support Darius gives to the rebuilding project, although motivated by personal concerns quite different from those of the Judeans, brings about the achievement of the Judeans', and ultimately YHWH's, purposes, further continuing the ironic two-level structure of the narrative. In this regard he continues to act much as Cyrus did, using ostensibly religious considerations for political purposes, yet ironically achieving the religious purposes in a way beyond what he intended. Also as in the case of Cyrus, the fact that Darius issues a written decree is of more help to the cause of the Judean restoration than his personal attitude toward them. Since Darius is portrayed as self-interested and ultimately not sharing the religious values of the Judeans, it follows that the Judeans' ability to achieve well-being will be constrained at every turn by Darius's political ambitions.

In summarising the result of Darius's letter, the narrator takes care to remind the reader that the building was completed as much by the word of the prophets as by the command of the kings. He also sustains the placement of the elders of the Judeans in the role of temple builders. By using the noun **מלך** twice in Ezra 6:14, he distinguishes between the command of YHWH and the command of the Persian kings. This is consistent with the interpretation maintained in this study from the very beginning of EN, which sees the Persian kings' commands operating to achieve their own desires on one level, but wholly subservient to YHWH's wishes on another. The use of the singular for 'decree' and 'king' in connection with three different kings contributes to the impression that the kings of Persia effectively function as a single character within the narrative, each making the same ironic contribution in the same ironic way. Designated as Persians, and uninvolved in the celebrations accompanying the completion of the temple, their foreignness to Israel and its faith is again highlighted. The appointment of priests and Levites by the people of Israel contributes further to the impression that the roles of the Davidic king are assumed by the people of Israel, not the Persian king.

The mention of the celebration of Passover after completion of the temple invokes again the motif of the exodus from Egypt. A number of parallels may be

observed between the Persian king and the Pharaoh of Egypt. The returned Judeans are able to rejoice that the Persian king, unlike Pharaoh, assisted them without hostility. Unlike their experience with Pharaoh, they are unable to rejoice that they have gained independence. This particular element will come to the fore more clearly as the narrative progresses.

The final verse of Ezra 6 summarises the portrayal seen throughout Ezra 1-6 by stating that the Persian king, linked by his designation as king of Assyria with the other foreign rulers with whom Israel has had to do, helped the Israelites in the temple rebuilding because of the action of YHWH upon his inner being. This confirms the understanding of the Persian king as a character of whom the implied reader is wary, but over whose ironic utilisation by YHWH the implied reader may rejoice. The king again being cast in the unusual role of helper in the temple construction contributes to the ironic nature of the narrative and the perception of distinction between the point of view of the king and the point of view of the narrator. The ironic view that arises in the narrative of EN is similar to that maintained in HB prophetic literature. Scholars have noticed that the narrator gives a perspective of events different from that which an ordinary observer of them may have had. Generally, however, they have not entertained the possibility that the narrator and implied reader recognise this difference of perspective as irony.

CHAPTER 6: EZRA 7-8

Ezra 7

Verse 1

Ezra 7 brings Artaxerxes back onto the scene, this time, apparently, in his appropriate chronological place. The epithet 'king of Persia' occurs here, too, linking Artaxerxes as the successor of Cyrus and Darius (cf. Ezra 6:14). This short epithet suffers as a characterisation by comparison with the lengthy pedigree of Ezra, which follows in vv. 1b-5 (Davies 1999: 44).⁸² As a result, the king emerges as a secondary character in this episode, even though he is the most powerful politically. The other effect of the epithet is to designate him as a foreigner to the Judeans, similar to the effect of the same epithet in Ezra 1:1-2.

Verse 6

As in Ezra 1:1; 5:5, where reference was made to YHWH's involvement in the proceedings, the reader is alerted to the reason why the episode about to be narrated produces a favourable result for the Judeans. Ezra is given what he asks because the hand of YHWH his God is upon him. The specific phrase will be met again in Ezra 7:28; 8:18; Neh. 2:8, 18. It indicates that the Lord had given his favour to that person (Fensham 1982: 100). One important implication is that the success was unlikely to have been achieved under normal circumstances. It follows that, according to the narrator, Ezra's success in receiving what he requested was not due to a favourable disposition of the king toward him personally or toward his people. It was due solely to YHWH's hand upon him. This may be contrasted with, for example, Joseph in Genesis or Daniel in Daniel. For both of these characters, God's

⁸² Ezra's significance is emphasised over that of Artaxerxes, not only by the genealogy (an instance of narrative expositional antecedents), but also by the character sketch in v. 10 (see above, p. 37).

presence with them results in recognition by the king that they are specially endowed (cf. Gen. 41:38; Dan. 4:5). Because of this recognition, the king is inclined to go along with their suggestions. In Ezra 7, on the other hand, Ezra does not appear to achieve any status in the kings' eyes other than as one qualified to introduce reforms on the basis of the law of the local deity in Judah, an undertaking desired by the king for reasons unexpressed in the narrative, but comprehensible to the implied reader on the basis of ancient Near Eastern practices.

This verse also makes clear that Ezra did make a request of the king. This goes a long way to explain why Artaxerxes uses such 'Jewish' language in the letter set forth in this chapter. This must be taken into account in assessing the effect his words have on his characterisation.

There are historical reasons why Artaxerxes may have wanted to support the Judean cult that have nothing to do with religion or a favourable attitude to Judah. For one thing, there was a revolt in Egypt very near to the seventh year of Artaxerxes I (Blenkinsopp 1988: 150; cf. v. 7). The rebels had considerable support from Greece and initially appeared as though they might well succeed in breaking away from the Persian Empire. It is known from other sources that Persian rulers at times granted cultic concessions and a degree of regional autonomy based on local traditions in an attempt to increase their support in a given area (Blenkinsopp 1987: 410-13). It is possible that Artaxerxes had similar hopes in granting Ezra's request. Another possibility is the simple desire to win favour in a potentially strategic location through a one-time grant, a practice also attested in extra-biblical literature (Bedford 2001: 143). Since neither the narrator nor Artaxerxes himself specifies the monarch's reasons, it is impossible to know what they were. But the point is that the implied reader was likely aware that the king could have had a variety of possible reasons for his behaviour from his own perspective, without assuming that he had become sympathetic to the Judeans or was sincerely committed to worshipping their god.

It is hard to say from the narrative just what Ezra requested. He may have asked for the specific items granted to him for cultic use, or the whole idea may have been his (Blenkinsopp 1988: 138). He may even have been aware that such a request

would be seen by Artaxerxes as serving imperial purposes. What the narrator chooses to highlight, however, is the divine providence he sees. Although the Persian kings took similar actions from time to time, it was by no means a foregone conclusion that they would make such provision for every cult.

Although it is unclear from the narrative what precisely Ezra asked for, it is clear that a logical structure similar to that in Ezra 1 is established. Ezra, as a scribe skilled in the law of Moses that YHWH God of Israel had given, assumes a role similar to that of Jeremiah the prophet. He, too, has the word of YHWH in his mouth. He speaks, in this case directly to the king, and the result is once again that the king does according to the word of YHWH's spokesman. It may be that the narrator has effected the ambiguity with respect to Ezra's request partly to facilitate the connection with ch. 1 on the reader's part. That the king carries out the will of YHWH is not attributed to the human speaker, but to the influence of YHWH. As in ch. 1, the result of this interaction is a 'going up' (עֲלֶיָּהּ) from Babylon (cf. 1:11), and the inclusion of all the temple functionaries corresponding to those in Ezra 2 further sustains the parallel (v. 7; Blenkinsopp 1988: 138). Artaxerxes appears to function virtually the same way as Cyrus did in ch. 1.

Verse 7

Duggan has pointed out that the transition from ch. 6 to ch. 7 is very smooth, passing over approximately a half-century with little notice (2001: 62). The regnal years proceed from the sixth year of Darius (6:15) to the seventh year of Artaxerxes (7:7). As Duggan observes, this contributes to the impression of a continuous sequence of salvation history, but it is also consistent with the earlier observation in this study that the Persian kings are portrayed as virtually one character or a single paradigm. After a year six, there naturally follows a year seven.

Verse 9

Another feature similar to ch. 1 present in ch. 7 is the second exodus theme. The awkward clause at the beginning of v. 9 has drawn several suggestions for

improvement, including repointing of 70' and insertion of words (cf. Williamson 1985: 89). Whether the MT is retained as it stands or some emendation is adopted, the point seems to be that Ezra arranged or 'laid the foundation for' his journey on the first day of the first month. This allows a connection to be made with the exodus from Egypt, the journey of which also began in the first month (Blenkinsopp 1988: 138-39). Since it is Ezra's responsibility to instruct Israel in the Torah after a journey out of the land of captivity, Ezra functions as something of a second Moses (cf. Koch 1974: 185-86). As in ch. 1, the hints of a second exodus have the effect of making the reader think of the king of Persia, who corresponds to the Pharaoh of the first exodus, in rather unfriendly terms. Movement away from his primary sphere of influence is seen as a blessing, and fosters hopes that full independence in the land promised to the ancestors may be achieved.

Verse 10

Verse 9 repeats that the hand of Ezra's God was upon him, this time adding the adjective 'good' to modify 'hand'. Verse 10 then expands on the fact that Ezra was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses (v. 6) to provide a fuller account of why divine favour followed Ezra. It is because he had firmly set his heart to study the Torah of YHWH and to do it and to teach statute and judgment in Israel. This creates the impression that YHWH's favour is a direct result of Ezra's commitment to YHWH's law. The help and support of Artaxerxes are due to YHWH's, not Artaxerxes', goodwill. With Ezra presented as a model of uprightness, the reader is not surprised when later, allowed to speak in his own words, Ezra attributes God's favour to YHWH's concern for his house, rather than Ezra's own piety (v. 27).

Verse 11

Verse 11 then introduces a letter that Artaxerxes gave to Ezra authorising him to return to Jerusalem with any Israelites who wished to accompany him, to appoint judges to enforce the Torah in Judah and Jerusalem and to teach the Torah to those who do not know it. Williamson notes that although it is longer, the form of this

letter is strikingly similar to the other letter from Artaxerxes at Ezra 4:17-22 (1985: 98). This reinforces the idea that it is the same king issuing a decision in this case as in the earlier one. Although he was implored and swayed by the enemies of the Judeans then, he is convinced by one of the Judeans in the present instance, and this is because YHWH's hand is upon Ezra the Judean. The similarities between the two cases highlight the cause of the main difference.

In Ezra's designation as priest and scribe, followed by the further specification that he was a scribe of the law of YHWH, it is quite possible that the two perspectives running through this narrative are placed side by side. The official titles Ezra had, recognised by all, were priest and scribe. The Persians would have known him as such. As scribe he likely had a post in the Persian court. His designation as a scribe of the 'words of the commandments of YHWH', on the other hand, emphasises his fluency with the scriptures. The two sides of what it meant for Ezra to be a scribe, by no means mutually exclusive, blend together in this passage. For king Artaxerxes Ezra's fluency in the law makes him the perfect official to send on the mission he has in mind. For the Judeans Ezra's official status within the Persian administration facilitates the task of teaching and enforcing the Torah of YHWH. But for the Persians, Ezra's political credentials were most important, while for the Judeans (and the narrator in particular), his religious qualifications were most important (cf. Schaeder 1930: 39-59; Ackroyd 1970: 268; Williamson 1985: 100; Blenkinsopp 1988: 136; Karrer 2001: 102-03).

Verse 12

Artaxerxes, of course, designates Ezra in a way that, from Artaxerxes' perspective, presents him as fit for the task. Ezra is a scribe of the law of the God of heaven. This designation for God has already been encountered several times within EN. It seems to have been the standard way of referring to the God of Israel in discourse between Jews and Persians. The king's description of Ezra is slightly but significantly different from that of the narrator (cf. vv. 6, 11). Artaxerxes makes no mention of Moses and does not use the name YHWH (Schams 1998: 52). From the perspective of the narrator and implied reader, Artaxerxes' understanding of the

Judean religion is superficial, sufficient only for him to instruct that it be reinstated. Once again, the differences bring out the different perspectives at work in the narrative. Coggins has written that

it is possible to understand Ezra's mission in mainly religious terms, a revival of strict traditions in a community which had fallen into lax customs; or to understand his work as political, a task carried out on behalf of the Persian ruler in an area of his empire where peace and security were of particular importance (1989: 238).

While Coggins sees this as an ambiguity within the text, it seems reasonable to suppose that this ambiguity is intentional on the part of the narrator, in order to further the dual-perspective approach evident throughout EN.

Artaxerxes identifies himself as 'king of kings'. This title seems to have been used quite commonly by the Persians (Williamson 1985: 100). While possibly almost a stock phrase by the time of EN, it is encountered here for the first time in the book, and emphasises the fullness of the king's authority (Klein 1999: 720). It serves to heighten the drama and irony in connection with the powerful king being directed by YHWH to achieve his ends.

Verse 13

The first part of the content of Artaxerxes' letter is reminiscent of the content of Cyrus's proclamation in ch. 1 in terms of several features (Blenkinsopp 1990: 313). Exiled Judeans are permitted to travel to Jerusalem, material provision for the Jerusalem temple is made by non-Judeans living in Babylon (vv. 15-16) and vessels for use in the temple are to be conveyed to Jerusalem by those returning (v. 19). This makes the actions of Artaxerxes and Cyrus seem similar in the reader's eyes.

But the permission granted by Artaxerxes has another implication as well, namely, that permission to travel to Jerusalem was required by Judean exiles, even so many years after Cyrus's decree. It is a reminder that the Judeans were not freed in any thoroughgoing sense by the earlier edict. They continued to be in a state of captivity, and the Persian king is their captor.

Verse 14

Artaxerxes is portrayed as making his decision in concert with his seven counsellors. Whether the historical referent would be to the same group of people or not, the use of the Hebrew cognate *לעץ* in Ezra 4:5 establishes a parallel between the passages. It was specifically counsellors who were bribed to frustrate the building activity throughout Cyrus's reign and into the time of Darius. Since the king acts in agreement with the counsellors on both occasions, it makes it hard to sustain any view that would distinguish between king and counsellor with respect to their support for the Judeans.

The first task Artaxerxes specifies is the enquiry Ezra is to set up about Jerusalem and Judah by means of the law of his god. Williamson finds it difficult to understand the purpose of simply investigating whether or not the law was being observed (1985: 101). Yet by including these words in the report of Artaxerxes' letter, the narrator seems to have found an appropriate way of introducing Ezra's mandate, while at the same time making a connection with the Rehum correspondence. The root *בקר* is the same as was used in Ezra 4:15, 19. In that passage Rehum and company suggested and Artaxerxes carried out an 'enquiry concerning Jerusalem' in the royal archives. It was discovered that Jerusalem had a long history of rebellion, and the king decided to have the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls stopped. In the present passage, Ezra is also sent to make enquiry concerning Jerusalem, but this time the search will be made in what is for the narrator a more trustworthy source, the law of Ezra's God. The switches from accusation to support, and from royal archive to Torah as textual source, serve to highlight the good hand of YHWH at work in reversing matters. Interestingly, Ezra's inquiry will also discover rebellion, though this is against the Torah, not the king. The narrator is much more concerned about this type of rebellion.

The narrator, of course, sees the significance of Ezra's mission as the reintroduction and enforcement of Torah in Judah. For the Persian ruler, there was a higher priority. Ben Zvi has written that

since the legitimation of rulers was mainly religio-traditional; and the criteria governing their appraisal usually combined political and religious values and orientation, there could not be a better way to support the legitimacy of an

Achaemenid appointee as governor of Yehud than to present him as an enforcer of the "sacred tradition" (1995: 126).

The sending of Ezra on his mission, then, would likely be perceived in the first instance as an assertion of control by the Persian king himself. As it happens, however, Ezra turns out not only to be well-versed in Torah but also sincerely committed to practicing it. He fulfils the function of restoring God's law to the community rather more than what Artaxerxes likely required, which would merely have been to use the traditions to impose order and Persian control.

Verses 15-16

Ezra is commissioned to bring silver and gold with him to Jerusalem from Babylon. The sources of this treasure include the king and his counsellors, as well as the whole province of Babylonia more generally (v. 16). This detail adds another parallel to the earlier edict of Cyrus, in which donations of every kind, including silver and gold (1:6), were given by the non-Judeans in Babylon (1:11) as donations toward the work on the temple. Besides inviting identification between Cyrus and Artaxerxes, the mention of the treasure brought out of the land of captivity recalls again the theme of the spoiling of the Egyptians (Throntveit 1992: 45). This tends to characterise the king as a captor or oppressor, from whom the Judeans wish to escape. Like Cyrus, Artaxerxes does allow them to be restored to their land geographically. But also like Cyrus, he does not grant them independence.

As to the king's motivation, the donations referred to in this passage may be compared conceptually with the special favours granted to specific cults for political reasons (Grabbe 2001: 109). Apart from questions about the historical veracity of the account in EN, this would seem to be the framework within which the implied reader would understand Artaxerxes' actions.

Artaxerxes refers to the god of Israel in v. 15, having previously referred to the god of heaven (v. 12). Both of these designations were also used by Cyrus in his edict of ch. 1. The two kings sound the same. Also, the use of 'god of Israel' reinforces the ethnic distinction between Artaxerxes and the Israelites. As in ch. 1 there is reference to both the king of Persia and the god of Israel.

The mention that the dwelling of the god of Israel is in Jerusalem has been recognised as terminology used by Jews in exile to indicate that that was where the real house of God was. Others have recognised, however, that the syntactic structure 'god X, who is in Y' seems to have been used frequently in that period with reference to various gods and places (Fensham 1982: 105). Once again, there is a situation in which statements in the mouth of the Persian king are to be read in terms of conventional usage, but at the same time may be perceived to have a different and greater significance, of which the king is unaware, from the standpoint of the implied reader.

Verse 17

Provision is made in v. 17 for purchasing the appropriate grain and drink offerings to accompany the sacrifices on the altar of the house of God in Jerusalem. Many readers have maintained that it is unlikely that Artaxerxes would have become acquainted with these features of Israelite worship (e.g. Blenkinsopp 1988: 149). They ascribe responsibility for these words completely to the writer of EN. The implied reader, however, has already been made aware that Ezra made a request (possibly several) of some sort to the king (7:6). The natural conclusion is that these requests included terminology relevant to their subject, and that the king's response uses the same terminology. In fact, extra-biblical literature confirms that the Persians did use the language in which requests were put to them in their responses (Williamson 1985: 11).

It must not be overlooked that Artaxerxes refers to the deity as 'your god'. It is clear that Artaxerxes does not consider himself a worshipper of this god but is acting out of the perspective typical in that time in that part of the world. He wishes to show respect to the gods of at least some of his subject peoples. This attitude toward the various Near Eastern deities is not shared by the narrator.

Verse 18

Some have suggested that the offering which Ezra is to transport to Jerusalem was intended primarily for use on a single occasion (e.g. Allen 2003a: 61). Thus, v. 18 would inform Ezra that whatever was left over could be used for cultic purposes until it was used up. It would also avoid the interpretation deemed so improbable by many that the provisions described in vv. 21-22 were to be provided annually or on some other regular basis (Fensham 1982: 105-06). The entirety of the provision is to be used for cultic purposes ('according to the will of your god'), not for any other support of the Judeans themselves (Klein 1999: 721; Clines 1984: 104).

Once again, mention of 'your god' maintains distance between Artaxerxes and the Judeans.

Verse 19

The mention of vessels for the service of the house of the Judeans' god provides a further parallel to ch. 1. The effect is to make Cyrus and Artaxerxes appear to be very similar, contributing to the perception of 'the king of Persia' as a single typical character in EN.

The designation 'god of Jerusalem' occurs only here in the HB. It reinforces the impression that Artaxerxes thinks of the Judeans' god much as any ancient Near Easterner would think of the god of any people. As van Wijk-Bos has put it, 'There is reverence and respect here, but also a distancing on the part of the king . . .' (1998: 37).

Verse 20

The provision to defray costs from the king's treasury is parallel to that found in the decree of Cyrus in Ezra 6:4. Unlike Darius, however, Artaxerxes makes no direct reference or indirect allusion to the actions of Cyrus or any other of his predecessors. While Darius was understood to be trying to follow Cyrus's lead, Artaxerxes appears to be motivated by conventional ancient Near Eastern interests,

presumably similar to those that motivated Cyrus in the first place, or that motivated other Persian monarchs on other occasions.⁸³

Verses 21-24

Verses 21-24 run parallel to Ezra 6:9-10. Artaxerxes makes clear that whatever the god of heaven commands in connection with his temple is to be done conscientiously (אֶסְכַּרְנָא, *HALOT* II, 1807). The effect is once again to make Artaxerxes appear as one of the stock Persian kings, this time by identifying him with Darius.

Davies writes that the 'commonality of values among the king, YHWH, the narrator, and Ezra climaxes here when the king decrees whatever the God of heaven commands' (1999: 45). It is important, however, that the king is clear that he has in mind to support the commands of this god with respect to the cultic temple liturgy (v. 23). The focus for Artaxerxes is on the normalisation of cultic practice, a theme that has been observed previously. 2 Kings 17 reflects the belief that attempts by a ruler to placate YHWH through correct liturgical practice while continuing the worship of other deities is unacceptable. Thus, the overlap in values between king and narrator is limited. It may further be observed that some scholars have drawn a comparison between this passage and 2 Chronicles 19, particularly v. 10, where the king (Jehoshaphat) instructs certain Levites, priests and heads of Israelite families to give faithful instructions and judgments to their fellow Israelites (Blenkinsopp 2001: 55; Klein 1999: 722). But the contrasts between these passages may be more instructive than their similarities. Whereas Jehoshaphat gives his warning so that YHWH's wrath may not come upon his listeners and their families, Artaxerxes wishes to avoid the occurrence of divine wrath on what belongs to him alone. These observations together show that Artaxerxes is most likely understood by the implied reader as a

⁸³ As with the letter of Darius in Ezra 6, the narrator has again achieved similarity between Artaxerxes' letter and the proclamation of Cyrus in ch. 1 on the levels of linguistic sense (transfer of temple vessels, provision of support from non-Judeans), plot (journey to Jerusalem) and theme (YHWH's decisive influence), see above, p. 51.

pagan king wishing to placate YHWH for his own protection, just as he would placate other deities (Fensham 1982: 107). The narrator, far from holding values in common with this character, sees him as ironic insofar as he achieves YHWH's purposes.

Artaxerxes provides his clearest statement of motivation for the contents of this letter in v. 23. These things are to be done lest wrath come upon the king's realm and descendants. A similar rhetorical construction is used here as was used by Artaxerxes at Ezra 4:22. There, too, he expressed concern about the harm that might come to him—in that case, in the form of lost revenue. On that basis he decided to stop the reconstruction of the Jerusalem city walls. In the present passage his motivation has not changed. Whether he chooses to support restoration efforts in Judah or hinder them appears to depend entirely on what he perceives to be of greatest support to his kingship and greatest benefit to his family. This, indeed, has appeared to be the motivation of the actions of all Persian kings in EN, either explicitly or implicitly.⁸⁴

The imperial exemption from taxation for cult personnel finds parallels in extra-biblical literature of the Persian period as well (Blenkinsopp 1988: 150). The desire to remain in favour with the relevant deity is common to these examples. Although a debate exists with respect to the authenticity of some of this evidence (Grabbe 1992: 59), its relevance for this study is that it provides evidence of the conceptualisations extant in ancient texts. Whether Persian rulers actually granted the concessions claimed on the occasions in question, the implied readers of these texts understood the motivation of these kings, as characters in the texts, to be the desire to remain on good terms with the local god.

Given that the same forms of revenue are referred to in ch. 4, it is likely that the narrator intends the reader to see an ironic reversal under the influence of YHWH. Not only is Ezra granted everything he asks because of the divine hand

⁸⁴ In HB narrative the portrayal of character depends more on repetition than on explicit commentary, see above, p. 35.

upon him, he is granted (whether he specifically asked for it or not) the very thing the king was most unwilling to give in the prior episode, namely, the loss of tax revenue.

Verse 25

The meaning of the word 'wisdom' (חכמה) in this context has not been agreed on by scholars. One range of views holds that it refers to some cognitive ability Ezra possesses, whether intelligence, judgment, or ability in applying the law (Fensham 1982: 108; Klein 1999: 722). The main alternative is that 'wisdom of your god which is in your hand' is another way of referring to the law (cf. v. 14). A number of scholars seem to want to avoid the interpretation that it refers to the law. Blenkinsopp says the phrase is 'totally out of place in an official document of this kind but entirely intelligible when we recall the Deuteronomic equation of the law with wisdom' (1988: 151). It appears, however, that the narrator may have intentionally included this particular wording here in order to point the reader toward such connections.

The first task Ezra is given in this verse is to appoint judges. From the Persian side, this obligation is easy enough to understand. For the narrator, however, there is very likely a connection to be made with the injunction in Deuteronomy to install a judicial system to enforce the Torah (Deut. 1:16-17; 16:18; 17:8-13). Alongside this is the emphasis on teaching to ensure that all Israelites are aware of the content of the Torah (Deut. 31:9-13, etc.). Fortunately Artaxerxes, in his desire to have local cultic customs restored to normal, recognised the potential need for instruction and authorised Ezra and his appointees to meet it. The 'Deuteronomic' significance of these actions would not likely have been appreciated by Artaxerxes.

A further possible association that should not be overlooked is that between Ezra and Moses in Exod. 18:13ff. Since Moses also appointed judges for Israel and gave them the law, Ezra appears to be cast in the role of second Moses. This is consistent with the second exodus theme evident at numerous points throughout EN.

The mention of the law of God in this passage has given rise to considerable debate about the nature of the document Ezra was bringing with him from Babylon to Judah. One thing that does seem clear is that the king presumes that some people

already know it (Rendtorff 1999: 90). This would seem to rule out the possibility that Ezra was promulgating a document newly composed in Babylon. In keeping with the interest in restoring normalcy to cultic activities, it would seem Artaxerxes would only sanction a law which (he at least believed) had a long history.

Blenkinsopp has likened Ezra's mission to that of Udjahorresnet in Egypt under Darius I:

the two goals of Ezra's mission correspond to the two phases of Udjahorresnet's activity: the restoration of the cult at the national and dynastic shrine of Sais; the reorganization of judicial institutions, for which the smooth functioning of the Houses of Life was a necessary precondition (1987: 419).

The two show similar concerns to ensure that the local cult was operating properly and that the traditional laws were known and observed. As with the matter of temple reconstruction, a number of scholars have thought it unlikely that so minor a group as the Judeans would draw the interest of the Persian king in their cult. For the purpose of this study, however, the question is not whether it can be established historically that Artaxerxes had such an interest and issued such a decree. What matters is that the implied reader would not be unfamiliar with such actions and would interpret them according to their usual meaning in the contemporary context. Thus, the efforts of Persian kings to support the cults of their subjects, when such efforts occurred, were welcome but not misunderstood as evidence of the king's devotion to that particular cult or deity. The political angle, namely, the assertion of the king's right to rule in the domain where the cult was practised, was clearly understood by the subjects and was likely recognised as the primary motivation from the king's side.

Verse 26

Artaxerxes attaches a threat of punishment at the end of his letter. This is another feature that contributes to the parallel between it and the letter of Darius in Ezra 6 (cf. vv. 11-12), making the two kings appear similar.

Another topic that has prompted wide discussion is the relationship between the law of Ezra's god and the law of the king (Watts 2001). On the basis of texts

such as 1 Chron. 26:32 and 2 Chron. 19:11, as well as Esther and Daniel (Knoppers 2001: 128-29), it seems that the two were probably understood to be distinct. Blenkinsopp maintains that the construction with אֲנִי repeated also suggests that the two are not to be equated (1988: 151). On this reading the meaning would be that the stipulated sanctions are available for imposition against those who do not obey either the law of the god of the Judeans or the law of the king. Of course, in case of conflict between the two, the law of the king would be understood to take precedence (Dandamaev and Lukonin 1989: 117).

Eskenazi holds that there is no tension between the law of God and the law of the king, here or elsewhere in EN (1989: 183). This cannot be accepted without refinement. As in Ezra 6:14, the narrator seeks to draw attention to how, *on this occasion*, YHWH's will and the Persian king's will produced no conflict. As has been seen, the narrator consistently attributes such a state of affairs to YHWH's sovereign power and action. It is ignoring the way the narrator has constructed his narrative to conclude that there is *routinely* no tension between the two. Within the context of EN, Nehemiah 1-6 makes clear that rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem was part of the plan of restoration envisioned by YHWH. Yet the command of the king in Ezra 4 directly hindered that objective. The portrayal of the episode in Ezra 4 does not seem to find fault with the Judeans, as though the problem was their proceeding without explicit permission from the king. Rather, the episode serves to illustrate the continual opposition from the enemies of the Judeans, and their ability to influence the king. The hardships encountered by the Judeans as a result of royal taxation, mentioned in Nehemiah 5, are another indication that the law of the king and the law of God may indeed stand in tension. Ultimately, of course, Neh. 9:32-37 makes explicit that the requirement to submit to Persian oppression is a result of the sin of the Judeans and does not reflect God's intentions to allow them to enjoy the land he has promised them.

It seems preferable to read with Clines:

Artaxerxes' authority is on the face of it the primary authority: it is *his* letter that gets Ezra moving from Babylonia to Judah. But we soon discover that his authority in reality does no more than make space for the authority of the law of Ezra's God: it is not Artaxerxes's law that will rule in Judah but "the law of the

God of heaven" (Ezra 7:21). Artaxerxes makes a law that it is someone else's law that must be obeyed! The interlacing of the texts carries with it an irony both gentle and grave (1989: 200).

The implied reader probably understands that Artaxerxes reserved the priority for those laws which he enacted. But in terms of the significance of his rescript for the narrator of EN, there is no question that Clines is correct. What Artaxerxes achieves is that he gives Ezra the right to proceed with the enforcement of Torah.

The harsh penalties of v. 26 themselves stand out for the implied reader as divergent from Torah (Ska 2001: 167). These are Persian punishments, and the king wishes to assert his will (Blenkinsopp 1988: 152). That one of these provisions is able to be invoked in the handling of the mixed marriages is convenient (cf. Ezra 10:8), but testifies to the irony that the king's commands, which are not essentially in line with those of YHWH, turn out to support YHWH's purposes in this instance.

Conklin has suggested that the Aramaic correspondence of Ezra 4-7 shows a narrative 'growth' in Artaxerxes' character (2001: 86). He contends that by ch. 7 Artaxerxes fears God more than his potential loss of revenues. He sees a contrast wherein the Persian king moves from opposition to Judean interests in Jerusalem to whole-hearted support of them. There is certainly a contrast observable between the actions of Artaxerxes in Ezra 4 and his actions in Ezra 7. But what is the same in both cases is that Artaxerxes appears to be motivated by self-interest. He 'fears God' not in the sense of having become a 'God-fearer', but in the standard ancient Near Eastern sense in which it was considered prudent to avoid the wrath of any and all local gods (Fensham 1982: 107). Since the issue in Ezra 4 was not framed by either Rehum or Artaxerxes in relation to any deity at all, no comparison can be made with respect to his religious convictions, and there is no reason to suppose that he was not already concerned at that time with placating the regional divinity. The implied reader is aware that Artaxerxes comes after Darius chronologically, and Darius exemplified the similar concern to curry favour with the local deity. Perhaps most important of all, Artaxerxes is portrayed as concerned for the Jerusalem cult only at a distance. He wants things to be done properly 'over there' in Judah, so that he will not suffer. Aside from making financial donations for cultic activities, Artaxerxes is not a participant in this cult and has no interest in learning the laws that Ezra knows

so well and is being sent to teach. From the perspective of the narrator, it is hard to perceive growth of any significance in the character of Artaxerxes. To put it in literary terms, while it may be said that there is further *disclosure* of his character, in that he is seen in ch. 7 to be concerned with placating the gods, there is no *development* in his character.⁸⁵

Duggan has noted that

the edict of Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:12-26) directly propels the mission of Ezra from his journey to Jerusalem to his reading of the Torah (Ezra 7:1-Neh 8:18) and, via its directive to implement the law in Judah (Ezra 7:14, 25-26), indirectly sustains the application of the Torah to the community's life, which continues to the conclusion of the book (Neh 12:44-13:31; cf. 10:29-40) (2001: 61).

It is part of the narrator's purpose to show that these events were able to occur because of the edict of Artaxerxes. But the sense the reader gets is that the king has merely set these events in motion, without an informed understanding of them. As YHWH's purposes are achieved, it is evident that the Persian ruler's role in them is ironic.

It should be pointed out that there is another important similarity between the rescript of Artaxerxes and the edict of Cyrus.⁸⁶ Each deals with an important aspect of the restoration of the Judeans from exile. The edict of Cyrus authorises temple reconstruction and the decree of Artaxerxes gives the Torah official sanction among the Judeans in Ebir-nari. Yet in both cases, the narrator has been careful to include details that indicate what, for him, is the legitimating factor. The temple is to be rebuilt in its original place and restocked with its original vessels, and its liturgy is to be re-established as it was before. It is all to be done according to the law of Moses and the instructions of David. The ancient Near Eastern concern for cult normalisation provides the motivation for this from the Persian side, but that allows the implied reader to discern the two levels along which the narrative moves. The motivations of the Persian kings represent the surface or human level, but the

⁸⁵ See above, p. 34.

⁸⁶ Analogies and parallels provide evaluation of a character without explicit commentary, see above, p. 51.

narrator wishes the reader to see a deeper, divine level. It is similar with the rescript of Artaxerxes. It authorises the law with which Ezra is so familiar to be enforced in Judah, but this authorisation is not what gives the law its significance for the narrator. For him the crucial factor is that it is the law of Moses that YHWH the God of Israel had given (Ezra 7:6). Artaxerxes' sanction is a means to the divine end of promulgating that law anew in Judah.

Verse 27

The narrator has presented the evidence of God's intervention by giving the text of Artaxerxes' letter in its original language, Aramaic. Since it represented the king's own perspective, the connections to YHWH's purposes were ironic, stated in terms that could be understood on the human, imperial level as well as on the divine. At v. 27, however, it is Ezra's own voice that the narrator presents to the reader. Ezra, of course, the scholar of Torah, perceives correctly what is occurring on the divine level. He is able to speak directly to the reader about the irony of events. The reader is not left to infer it from his speech, as was the case with the kings. The switch to Ezra's voice is marked initially and most forcefully by the switch from Aramaic to Hebrew.

Along these same lines, Ezra refers to YHWH as the 'God of our fathers'. The distance from which the king spoke about matters pertaining to the cult in Jerusalem raised the reader's awareness of the distance between the king and the Judeans. Ezra's reference to the God of their ancestors maintains the conceptual framework in which king and Judeans belong in separate camps. The use of the divine name by Ezra is, of course, also consistent with this structure.

The tone of Ezra's comment on Artaxerxes' rescript is unmistakably ecstatic. He gives praise to YHWH, because it is obvious to him that the king has acted as he has because YHWH has put it in his heart to do so. Williamson identifies this benediction as being 'in the simplest form of the declarative psalm of praise . . . namely, "shout of praise" followed by "report of God's act"' (1985: 99). Westermann found that such psalms arise in the historical books as an immediate response to God's intervention (1966: 87).

He is overwhelmed that YHWH has put 'such a thing as this' in the heart of the king. The emphasis is on the amazing character of what YHWH has done and, indeed, its unexpectedness. The implication is that one would never have thought that the Persian king would choose to do what Artaxerxes has done. The reader has been prepared to see events from this perspective by the episode in ch. 4, in which Artaxerxes acted to stop the rebuilding of the city walls of Jerusalem. The fact that Ezra has the letter in writing is evidence of YHWH's spectacular intervention. Such astonished exuberance is incompatible with the presupposition that the Persian kings were predisposed to benevolence toward Judah.

As with Cyrus and Darius, YHWH exercises influence over Artaxerxes' inner being. The idiom is not identical to that used in Ezra 1 or 6, but surely the implied reader is to see a parallel to YHWH stirring Cyrus's spirit and changing Darius's heart. The portrayal of the relationship of YHWH to the Persian kings is consistent in EN. The deity works on the inner being of the king, with the result that the king acts in a way that contributes to the restoration of Judah from exile.

A very similar expression will be encountered in Neh. 2:12; 7:5. In those contexts, the speaker is Nehemiah, and he refers to what YHWH has put into his heart. In this passage as well as in Nehemiah, the idiom serves to certify that what was put into the individual's heart was good or right (since it came from YHWH), and to specify that credit for the ensuing result should be given to YHWH (since he was the originator of the idea) rather than the individual involved. The rhetorical effect within the narrative differs slightly, however, depending on whether the idiom is used in the third or first person. Thus, when Nehemiah claims that YHWH has put something into his heart (first-person use, since he is the speaker), he affirms the validity of the idea. But at the same time, he confirms that he is aware of YHWH's activity. Both of these aspects work to heighten the reader's esteem for the character. When the narrator or Ezra uses the similar idiom with respect to the king (third-person), the rhetorical effect is different. The rightness of the idea that was placed in the heart is still affirmed, but in this kind of case there is no awareness of YHWH's activity on the part of the character, since it is the narrator or another character who informs the reader that the idea came from YHWH. Since the character in question

(the king) displays no knowledge of YHWH's action upon his heart, he appears to be an unknowing tool in YHWH's hands. The narrator and Ezra gain the reader's esteem for discerning the work of God, but the king does not.

This highlights another way in which the portrayal of the king is similar in Ezra 1 and 7, namely, that it is another observer, not the king himself, who attributes the actions to the inner influence of YHWH. In Ezra 1 Cyrus claims to have been appointed by YHWH to build the temple in Jerusalem, but this can be understood within the context of conventional political discourse. In other words, since Cyrus was ruler over all the nations (Ezra 1:2), it was natural for him to say that it was his god-given duty and privilege to build or rebuild houses for their gods. It is the narrator who informs the reader that in this particular instance, YHWH actually stirred his spirit to make such a proclamation. Likewise, in ch. 7, the concern on Artaxerxes' part to avoid the wrath of the god of Jerusalem is not attributed by him to any personal interaction with that god. It is Ezra who reveals that this course of action was placed into the king's heart.

Karrer sees the interests of the community and the king meeting in the temple and the sacrificial service. She says that the Israelites accept the king's role as 'owner' and 'operator' of the temple (2001: 332). The alternative suggested by this study is that this is true only in an ironic sense. The narrator understands that within the socio-political world of the Persian Empire the king was thought to have these roles with respect to the temple, but he believes that YHWH used these conventional beliefs to restore the temple in Jerusalem to his people. Support for the latter view may be found in the fact that the narrator consistently portrays the Israelites as the builders of the temple, not the Persian king, contrary to conventional ancient Near Eastern discourse and other Hebrew narrative (e.g. 1 Kings 8). In addition, the responsibility for making provision for the temple does not seem to be fulfilled by the king at various points within the narrative, and by Nehemiah 10 the Judean community seems to bear the full weight of obligation in this matter.

Verse 28

There is some question as to whether the phrase *עלי הטה-חסד לפני המלך* should be understood to indicate that YHWH extended favour to Ezra and that this took place in the presence of the king, or that YHWH extended the king's favour to Ezra. The grammar seems to allow both possibilities. Whichever result is envisioned, the emphasis is on the fact that YHWH brought it about and that it would not have come about without YHWH's intervention. But it is not only the king whom Ezra is involved with in this context, but also his advisors and all his powerful officials. Either YHWH has made them all favourable toward Ezra, or it is before all of them that YHWH has extended his favour to Ezra. A possible scenario in the mind of the implied reader is one in which Ezra made his requests to the king and these were made known to the advisors and officials mentioned. At that point Ezra would be in a precarious position, since an unfavourable response could be accompanied by punishment for perceived sedition. His exultant exclamation might contain a note of relief. The element of risk would then provide a parallel with the story of Nehemiah (see below on Neh. 2:2). As a result of this 'deliverance' from the king and his officials, Ezra is emboldened to proceed with the project (v. 28b). In the end, either possible interpretation leads to the conclusion that something unlikely has occurred.

A contrast may be detected between the king and Ezra on the basis of the idiomatic use of *בְּיָד*. The king refers to the law of the god of heaven as being in Ezra's hand (v. 14). He uses the same idiom with reference to the wisdom of Ezra's god (v. 25), which was interpreted above as a parallel allusion to the law. Both of these expressions emphasise Ezra's possession, control or mastery of the law. It is in Ezra's power. The narrator and Ezra, however, use a different hand idiom. In v. 6 the narrator states that the hand of YHWH was upon Ezra, and in v. 28 Ezra echoes the same point. This idiom emphasises YHWH's control of the situation, rather than Ezra's. The difference is consistent with what has been observed to this point. The king understands affairs primarily from a human standpoint. While the power of gods must be respected, matters relating to their cults can be manipulated by humans for political purposes, in his view. The narrator and Ezra put the accent on the other

side. While they recognise the need for human initiative and believe that interaction between God and humans is meaningful, they concede that the greater responsibility for the progress made toward the Judean restoration lies with God. The choice of idiom, then, reflects differing perspectives on power and control.

The point that has been made before should be made again here. The fact of Artaxerxes' rule is taken for granted by the narrator and Ezra. What is significant in this episode is that YHWH prevails upon him such that he provides material support for the temple in Jerusalem and authorises Ezra to enforce biblical law in Judah. Although Artaxerxes' actions are consistent with those of a polytheistic monarch (Breneman 1993: 133),⁸⁷ the narrator sees them as of great benefit to the restoration of Israel from its state of exile. There is no implication in the text that Artaxerxes has a generally favourable attitude toward Israel outside of this particular act, or that he has become anything approaching what the narrator would consider a true worshipper of YHWH. The kingship of Artaxerxes over Judah is not 'validated' by the narrator in any sense. It is, rather, placed in subordination to the will and work of YHWH, who is seen as able to use it for his purposes, regardless of the personal intentions the monarch himself might have.

Ezra 8

Verse 22

Ezra does not attribute any significant degree of theological sophistication to Artaxerxes. Apparently Ezra had told the king that those who seek YHWH can be confident of his 'hand' upon them (for good) but those who forsake him will experience his powerful wrath. Anticipating a long journey to Palestine carrying a huge amount of silver and gold, Ezra perceives a dilemma. If he asks for military protection along the way, he thinks the king will suppose that Ezra's concern for safety is evidence that Ezra must not be seeking YHWH and therefore lacking

⁸⁷ The assumed motivations of characters will be used by the implied reader to fill gaps, such as why a character acted as he did, see above, p. 50.

confidence of YHWH's protecting hand, or else that Ezra does not actually believe what he had told him earlier. Of course, the implied reader sees no contradiction between using military power and trusting YHWH. But Ezra is not confident that the king will understand this. In the end Ezra decides to back up his claim to the king by travelling without armed guards. Clearly, he views Artaxerxes as one who cannot be expected to believe in YHWH's might, and who would ridicule a request even so practical as to obtain protection for a long journey. The character Ezra seems to share the view of the Persian king advanced in the study to this point. Although Artaxerxes has made provision for the temple in Jerusalem and given Ezra an important mandate with respect to the law of Israel's god, Ezra thinks the king lacks any clue about what YHWH is really like.

The implied reader may also wonder why it was incumbent on Ezra to ask for this assistance. Ordinarily one would expect that so much gold and silver would attract an armed escort (Blenkinsopp 1988: 169). The narrative is characteristically silent about the king's actual reasons, but the lack of an offer of help does not leave an impression of favourable treatment. The king seems perfectly willing to let the group go it on their own. Again, like the situation in Ezra 1, the king makes official provision for the cult and puts it in writing, but seems to do little to support his own efforts beyond this opening initiative.⁸⁸

Verse 25

Ezra 8:25 reports the distribution of the offering mentioned in 7:15-16 to the priests for safekeeping on the journey. It was already made clear in 7:27 that the generous donation of the king was due to the overriding influence of YHWH upon his heart. Just as the Israelites brought treasure out of Egypt at the first exodus and donated it for use at the cultic shrine (Exod. 12:35-36; 35:22), so Ezra and those travelling with him bring treasure out of Babylon for use at the temple. It is not far

⁸⁸ A character's inaction may be as important for characterisation as action, see above, p. 44.

to see the second exodus theme at work in this passage. Once again, this tends to place the Persian king in the role of Pharaoh.

Verse 31

The fact that Ezra and his band arrive safely with the treasure in Jerusalem is a very clear example of what has been displayed elsewhere in the narrative. The safe journey is due to YHWH's protection along the way. It is not due to any action on the king's part. In this instance there is no mistaking the fact. In the instances where the king was involved, the narrative made clear that it was YHWH's benevolence, not the king's, that was ultimately the cause of the Judeans' blessing.

Verse 36

The reader is told that the king's laws were delivered to the satraps and governors in Ebir-nari. The context suggests that this must refer to the instructions given in 7:21-24. While it is certainly true that Ezra and his companions were obedient to the king in delivering these laws or commissions, they had every motivation to do so, since they authorised provision for the Jerusalem cult from the provincial treasury and imparted exemption from taxation for the temple personnel. Thus, the actions of Ezra and company fit the pattern already established in the narrative whereby 'obedience' to the Persian king enables the Judeans to work towards the restoration from exile of their community in Judah. The coincidence of Persian command and restoration of community is due to YHWH's intervention.

Summary/Conclusion

At the beginning of Ezra 7, Artaxerxes is presented as king of Persia, identifying him as a foreigner and as belonging to the regime that succeeded the Babylonians. But he clearly takes second place to Ezra in importance in this episode. The portrayal of Artaxerxes as subject to the influence of scribes, including Ezra, provides opportunity to emphasise the effect of the divine hand in the outcome of events. Once again the Persian king is not the sovereign agent he wishes to be, but

turns out to achieve YHWH's purposes. The description of Ezra suggests that what he achieves in his interaction with Artaxerxes is unusual, attributable to YHWH's involvement. This is especially so since Artaxerxes is the same king who rendered a decision against the exiles in Ezra 4. This again makes Artaxerxes seem as though he is not characteristically favourable in his disposition toward the Judeans.

As with the previous episodes, the implied ancient Near Eastern reader could think of reasons why Artaxerxes may have wanted to support the Judean cult, quite apart from any personal attachment to it or the Judeans on his part. This reintroduces the two levels of narrative action encountered earlier. The differences between Artaxerxes' and the narrator's speech further contribute to the perception of the distinction between their points of view, consequently enhancing the perception of the two narrative levels of action. Similar to instances noted earlier in the narrative, some of Artaxerxes' own words may be understood on two levels, of which he would only have been aware of one. The kingship of Artaxerxes is taken for granted by the narrator, but is not validated in any way, with YHWH's will given pre-eminence in the story. Also, the specific interest in the reintroduction of the Mosaic law to Judah would have served Artaxerxes' purposes of asserting his control over the region and restoring normality. His explicit statements betray self-interest as his primary motivation. The narrator and implied reader see a different purpose served in YHWH's scheme. The relationship between Ezra and Artaxerxes parallels in some ways that between Jeremiah and Cyrus in Ezra 1, encouraging the reader to see Cyrus and Artaxerxes similarly. Both respond to YHWH's word through his spokesman because of YHWH's influence upon them. Other details also enhance the conceptualisation of the Persian kings as a single paradigm. They share the ancient Near Eastern concern for generally showing respect to the gods of their subject peoples. The motif of the exodus from Egypt appears again, eliciting consideration of the Persian king in terms similar to those of the Egyptian Pharaoh. The fact that Ezra required permission to travel to Jerusalem reinforces the impression that the Judeans are still held as captives by the Persians. The king and his counsellors act in tandem, just as they did in Ezra 4. This enhances the impression that the king is subject to their views and that it is therefore ultimately YHWH who has made the

king act favourably toward the Judeans in this instance. The change from Ezra 4 in the nature of the 'enquiry' that is made also points to YHWH's hand in effecting reversal, as does the king's willingness to forego tax revenue, so dear to him in Ezra 4. The penalties attached to the rescript, clearly divergent from the Torah, themselves reinforce the ironic nature of the narrative when they turn out to be useful for the enforcement of the Mosaic law in Ezra 10.

Ezra's shout of praise in response to Artaxerxes' rescript plainly exposes the unexpectedness that the king would act in this way. By implication the king is not assumed to be sympathetic to the Judeans. Again, like Cyrus, he is depicted as only an unknowing tool in YHWH's hands.

Ezra's reluctance in Ezra 8 to ask the king for military protection is consistent with the interpretation to this point that the king is effectively ignorant in the ways of YHWH and unsympathetic to his followers. The fact that the group travelling with him arrives safely is further testimony, in this case explicit, that it is ultimately YHWH and not the Persian king who is bringing about favourable results for the exiles. Another scenario develops in which, as a result of YHWH's influence, 'obedience' to the Persian king results in the furtherance of the Judeans' restoration from exile.

CHAPTER 7: EZRA 9

Ezra 9 begins with the report of the officials to Ezra that the Israelites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations. If it was not already clear to the implied reader that acceptable worship of YHWH in the eyes of the narrator involves complete avoidance of involvement with other cults, this passage places it beyond all doubt. Those who worshipped in any way other than that prescribed in the Torah were not welcome to participate in the Jerusalem cult (Newsome 1975: 206). Within this narrative world, the Persian kings can be seen only as outsiders.

This episode provides an important parallel between Cyrus (as king of Persia) and the returned exiles. Both are initially stirred to act by YHWH (Ezra 1:1, 5). But in the course of the narrative, the returned exiles do not remain faithful to YHWH (Ezra 9:2, their action is referred to as *מַעַל*). Thus, the stirring brought about a specific action, not a lasting disposition. So it is with the Persian kings. Throughout EN they are seen to be moved by YHWH for specific acts, but the performance of these acts does not entail a lasting disposition to obey YHWH or act favourably toward his people. This emerges most clearly in the prayer of Nehemiah 9.

Verse 7

The prayer of Ezra in vv. 6-15 is recognised as a penitential lament. It differs from the penitential psalms of lament, however, in that it includes confession but no real supplication (Williamson 1985: 128-29). Thus, the focus is on Israel's sin and the resulting punishment they have received from God. Ezra characterises the Israelites' situation as being in great guilt ever since the days of their ancestors (v. 7). The first punishment he mentions is that 'we, our kings and our priests' have been handed over to the kings of the lands. This echoes the assessment of the elders in Ezra 5:12. He then goes on to mention their subjection to 'the sword, captivity, plunder and shame'. These are the forms which judgment takes in the pre-exilic historiography (cf. Judg. 2:14; 1 Kgs. 8:44-50; 2 Kgs. 17:20). He then affirms that

this condition continues to prevail to the present time (van Grol 1999: 213). The point he is making is that for Israel to live under the rule of foreign kings is to live in a state of punishment from God and that this is in fact their current condition. Just as foreign domination was experienced as punishment by the generation that went into exile, so it continues to be experienced as punishment by Ezra's contemporaries. The phrase 'this day' is repeated, emphasising that the troubles of the present can be understood in the same terms as those of the past. Werline points out that the punishments mentioned in this verse recall those in Deuteronomy 28. He concludes that the author of this text 'must have believed that the curses were still in effect and were the punishment for the nation's sins' (1998: 52). The narrative has tacitly assumed this up to now, but here it is made explicit.

Many scholars do not take this view. It is common to read that the general opinion about Persian rule reflected in EN is favourable (e.g. Blenkinsopp 1988: 183). It is the contention of this study, however, that the narrative of EN is most coherent when read against a background that assumes that Persian rule is generally experienced by the Israelites as punishment for sin and as unpleasant. The narrator relates the incidents in which the Persian kings extend support to the Judean exiles with such amazement precisely because this is not the norm. Each such instance is recognised as evidence of divine intervention, not as evidence of Persian benevolence. One of the advantages of the view set forth in this study for a literary reading is that the entirety of the narrative may be seen as consistent, and there is no need to posit redactional levels at odds with each other.

'Kings of the lands' also forms a parallel with 'peoples of the lands' in vv. 1, 11. These peoples are participants in pollutions and abominations which must be avoided by the Israelites. They are a source of trouble. The kings of the lands are naturally understood to be the rulers of these undesirable peoples and belonging to them.

In terms of the rhetorical situation of Ezra's prayer, the narrator informs the reader that Ezra was surrounded by those who 'trembled at the words of the God of Israel' (9:4). The implied reader recognises them as devout Yahwists, just as Ezra is. In describing the returned exiles' current situation in subjection to the Persian kings as a continuation of the shame of exile, Ezra seems to take for granted that all those

listening share this perspective.⁸⁹ He appears to be summarising their status in terms all present would accept. Thus, this view of Persian rule was so widely accepted among the devout Judeans (in the narrative world) that it did not need to be stated explicitly in most instances, but could simply be assumed.

Verses 8-9

Verses 8-9 contrast the general context in which the Israelites find themselves with the recent mercies shown them by God. Ezra states that for a short period of time, YHWH has shown mercy to them in that he has left them a remnant and given them 'a foothold in God's holy place' (Rudolph 1949: 88). He seems to be referring to the fact that there were those (including himself) who had 'survived' the exile experience to return to the land of Judah (Fensham 1982: 129). This remnant had been able to make a start in restoring the community by rebuilding the temple and reinstituting the cult. This is Ezra's reflection on the events which have been narrated in EN to this point. He attributes this progress to God's mercy toward Israel in the midst of their enduring punishment. The period of time involved is seen as brief in comparison to the long years of Israel's guilt, stretching back to the ancestors, which have precipitated YHWH's judgment. This interpretation seems to be confirmed by v. 9, in which Ezra reiterates that the Israelites' status as slaves is ongoing, but in the midst of this slavery, YHWH has extended favour toward them. The same interpretive issue is present in this verse as was encountered in 7:27. It is unclear whether Ezra means to say that YHWH's extension of his own favour to the Israelites took place in the presence of the king or whether YHWH extended the king's favour to them (Fensham 1982: 130). Either way, again, the emphasis is on YHWH's merciful intervention to bring about events that the Persian king would not normally be expected to permit. The result has been that the temple has been rebuilt and the returned exiles have been encouraged and feel that a start has been made in bringing the community back into existence. Effectively, Ezra gives an interpretation of

⁸⁹ How a speaker speaks to a third party about a character reveals important information about the speaker's relationship with the character, see above, p. 43.

recent history very similar to that which the narrator has been giving. It is not surprising that there should be a close correspondence between the view of the narrator and the view of Ezra, since Ezra has been described as one who is devoted to knowing and practicing Torah and who trusts in YHWH.

Reference to a 'peg' (גִּלְגָּל) in the holy place has also provoked questions regarding its meaning. Klein surveys some possibilities and judiciously concludes that regardless of the exact connotation of the metaphor, the point is that restoration of temple and cult hold out the prospect of further divine assistance (1999: 736). In other words, under the present circumstances, rebuilding the temple is a good start, but just a start (cf. Throntveit 1992: 53). According to v. 8, this start was attained through the favour of YHWH, with no mention made of the Persian king. The way that YHWH's favour was worked out in the human realm is described in v. 9.

The wall Ezra says has been given in Judah and Jerusalem has triggered speculation that it refers to the city walls of Jerusalem (cf. Rowley 1965: 147-51). The details of the context, however, argue for a metaphorical meaning. The 'peg' in the same verse is not to be taken literally, and it is unlikely that there was a wall throughout the whole of Judah. גִּלְגָּל is used elsewhere metaphorically to represent some aspect of Israel's relationship with YHWH. Isaiah 5:5 seems particularly helpful. In that context Israel is spoken of as a vineyard around which YHWH had built a fence (גִּלְגָּל). Having become dissatisfied with its produce, YHWH eventually decided to remove the fence and allow it to be trampled and devoured. The connotation associated with the fence, then, is YHWH's protection. In Ezra 9, many of these same concepts are present. YHWH had become displeased with Israel because of its sin. He handed them over to the kings of the lands and exposed them to attacks of various kinds. Ezra maintains, then, that YHWH has given them a wall by means of restoring them. Just as the temple has been restored, so has the גִּלְגָּל. The sword and captivity are not present threats for the returned exiles to the same extent that they were previously. They are still under the power of the Persian king, and the protection YHWH has afforded them is not fully restored, but it is a start. The wall probably refers to the protection YHWH has restored to them, rather than to protection afforded by the Persian kings. It begins to re-establish the sense of a

secure relationship between YHWH and his people (cf. Allen 2003a: 78). This is what Ezra hopes will come to fruition. It may be compared with the opposite scenario in vv. 14-15, in which YHWH, not the Persian king, removes the protection again, this time resulting in total destruction.

Ezra says that YHWH has given them a little revival in their slavery. The experience of slavery was associated with the exilic state, and the concept behind the revival metaphor is apparently that the people are dead when they are in exile (cf. Ezek. 37:1-14) (Fensham 1982: 130). By being allowed to return to Palestine and begin reconstruction of the temple, they have received a breath of new life. But the reviving is qualified by מְעַט, 'a little'. Verses 8-9 present a scenario in which the features of restoration for Israel are real but very limited. What they have experienced is only a small step on the road to complete restoration. This limited recovery has taken place in the context of servitude. The logic of Ezra's rhetoric suggests that the recovery is understood to be essentially in contrast with the servitude: they are slaves *but* YHWH has not forsaken them in their slavery and, despite the slavery, has brought about the benefits that have encouraged them. The implication is that a full restoration would involve the complete emancipation from their servitude to the foreign power. Thus, the Persian king is here quite clearly portrayed as a monarch whose dominion is unwanted and the removal of which is dearly hoped for.

The analysis of vv. 8-9 by van Grol contributes to this point (1999: 213). He notices that the two verses are arranged 'in such a way that the servitude occupies the centre . . . the tangible signs of mercy stand out against a background of servitude so that they become all the more precious'. In a sense, this is what has been presented to the reader throughout the narrative of EN.⁹⁰ The background of servitude is present implicitly for the most part. But it is only against such a background that the deeds of YHWH are appreciated as the narrator means them to be.

⁹⁰ Character is often revealed and confirmed gradually over the sequence of a narrative, see above, p. 34.

The mention of God not forsaking them in their slavery puts the implied reader in mind of the Egyptian period before the liberation by Moses (Smith-Christopher 2001: 317). Since there has been so much exodus imagery present in the narrative to this point, the connection here is easily made. Once again, this factor contributes to the Persian ruler being cast in the role of oppressor.

Those who would argue that EN teaches that the restoration of Israel consists in the rebuilding of temple and city at Jerusalem and the reinstitution of the cult, all under Persian rule, must contend with the fact that in 9:8-9 the temple and cult have been restored yet Ezra speaks of this as only a little reviving. He also refers to Israel's slavery as ongoing, and includes himself among those still enslaved. The freedom he looks for does not only have to do with the physical return to Palestine.

As earlier in EN, the favour extended to Israel by means of the Persian kings is directly attached to specific benefits. The Israelites have been revived to erect the house of God and repair it and to re-establish their dwelling in Judah and Jerusalem. There is no statement here (or elsewhere in EN) to the effect that the Persian kings have become favourably disposed to Israel in general, or that they have consistently treated them in a beneficial way.

Also consistent with the previous narrative in EN is the reference to the 'kings of Persia'. Within the succession of foreign dominators, it is specifically the Persian kings whom YHWH has chosen to sway on occasion to begin the restoration of Israel. As noted in the discussion on ch. 1, it is only after the time of the ascendancy of Babylon that this restoration began. Ezra the character appears to be aware of this feature also. At the same time, the viewing of the Persian kings as a single character or type is further encouraged here by referring to them only collectively. What goes for one, goes for all.

Another feature that mirrors the usage of the narrator is the reference to the God of Israel in v. 4. Later in the context, at v. 9, there is reference to the kings of Persia. Where these designations occurred earlier in the narrative, the Persian king or the narrator referred to the God of Israel in a way that maintained a separation between the two. In the present context, however, Ezra refers to the God of Israel in v. 4, but in v. 5 he refers to him as 'my' God and in v. 9 it is 'our' God. EN does not

allow the Persian kings to be identified as worshippers of the God of Israel. They are contrasted with those who are.

Davies interprets this passage as saying that YHWH's lovingkindness is extended to Israel 'in the face of the kings of Persia' (1999: 124-25). He contrasts this with the view in Neh. 9:37, where the kings over the Israelites take the bounty of their land and leave them in distress. He asks, 'Are the Persians instruments of the divine, as in Ezra's prayer? Or are they oppressors?' (1999: 125). It seems that in the sight of the narrator they are both. It is important to avoid the facile conclusion that if the Persians are used by YHWH in specific instances as divine instruments within the narrative, it must follow that they were the channels of his goodness to his people on a continual basis. It is precisely the fact that they are assumed to be characteristically oppressors within the narrative that makes their use by YHWH through the issuance of specific decrees to help rebuild the temple in Jerusalem so clearly an instance of divine intervention.

Klein writes that God extended his love to the Israelites 'in the presence of and, one might add, with the cooperation and willing participation of the kings of Persia' (1999: 736). Unfortunately, this way of putting things confuses matters. It is true that the Persian kings aided the Israelites willingly in the sense that they issued edicts to support the restoration while under no apparent duress. In this respect they were unlike the Pharaoh of Egypt in the story of the first exodus. He was unwilling to help the Israelites and only consented to their departure after suffering through ten plagues and absorbing the loss of his firstborn son. Even at that he subsequently reconsidered and pursued them. But the narrative consistently makes clear that the Persian kings only help the Israelites because YHWH supernaturally influences their decisions. Thus, he makes them willing in the sense that they do not put up a fuss like Pharaoh, yet they are no less the objects of YHWH's manipulation. Whereas Pharaoh's heart was hardened, the Persians' hearts are turned. In both instances, YHWH bent the will of the king to suit his purposes.

Summary/Conclusion

As with the pre-exilic and exilic generations, the post-exilic generation continues to experience domination by foreign rulers as divine punishment. Ezra himself seems to take for granted in his prayer that those around him share this view. The implication is that the exiles hope they will eventually be freed from Persian rule. The slavery motif brings the exodus theme to the fore again, with its attendant reflection on the Persian kings as parallel to Pharaoh. Ezra's interpretation of recent events parallels that discernible in the narrator's account of them. The Persian kings, although not themselves worshippers of YHWH, are seen to have been moved by YHWH to mediate specific blessings for the exiled Judeans. Recognition of the divine and human levels on which events have unfolded is evident in Ezra's prayer. His reference to the 'kings of the lands' functions to group all the rulers who had oppressed the Israelites, from the Assyrians through the Persians, into one group. The use of the phrase also tends to relate these kings to the 'peoples of the lands', who are explicitly to be avoided because of their abominations.

CHAPTER 8: NEHEMIAH 1-6

Nehemiah 1

Verse 3

As the reader proceeds into Nehemiah 1, one of the first things learned is that those living in Judah are in great distress because the wall of Jerusalem is in a shambles. Nehemiah is very concerned about this state of affairs and ultimately asks Artaxerxes the king for permission to travel to Jerusalem to make the necessary repairs. The narrative presumes that Nehemiah himself had no expectation that Artaxerxes would order such repairs on his own. The implied reader takes it for granted that life under the Persians is difficult for those living in Judah, and there is no general expectation of imperial support. The scene set is that Jerusalem is languishing, and the Persian administration is doing nothing to help the situation.

Verses 4-6

When Nehemiah hears about this situation, his response is to mourn, fast and pray for days. With v. 5 he, as speaker, begins a report of his prayer. This is likely intended as a representative summary of what he prayed over that period of time. The phrase 'this day' occurs at vv. 6, 11. Its use in v. 6 cannot mean 'today', since Nehemiah says he is praying this prayer day and night. Most commentators take it to mean 'now', and this is likely the meaning in v. 11 also (Allen 2003b: 90). After being told that Nehemiah prayed this prayer for days, the reader is informed that Nehemiah had his dramatic encounter with the king. The prayer thus functions as an 'audience with God' that Nehemiah has before his audience with the king. Nehemiah asks God to see and hear. This is exactly what happens when Nehemiah is in Artaxerxes' presence; the king observes Nehemiah's face and listens to his speech (Neh. 2:2, 4) (Karrer 2001: 197). As has been noticed in the earlier narrative, the text is structured in such a way that the actions of God are placed before the actions

of the king. God acts first, the king acts second. What God does determines what the king will do.

Nehemiah uses the title 'God of heaven' in his narrative description of his own actions (v. 4) and in his address to the deity in prayer (v. 5). It was noted previously that this particular title seems to have been commonly used by the Judeans in contexts where they had much contact with non-Judeans (Karrer 2001: 203-04 n. 215). Since Nehemiah was cupbearer to the Persian king, as the reader soon learns, he lived in such circumstances constantly, and it is not surprising that this form of reference to YHWH would become natural for him. Its appearance in this passage suggests that the implied reader recognised it as not only expedient for communication with non-Judeans, but as a legitimate description of YHWH in its own right. In v. 5 Nehemiah combines it with 'YHWH', as Cyrus had in Ezra 1. But, unlike Cyrus, Nehemiah adds a further lengthy epithet. The implied reader finds the sincerity of Nehemiah's convictions about YHWH much more convincing than the sincerity of Cyrus's (expressed) convictions about YHWH.

Verse 7

Nehemiah makes explicit mention of Moses in v. 7. The reference to him in this context is as the one through whom YHWH gave his commandments to Israel. In vv. 8-9 Nehemiah recounts the promise given through Moses that the Israelites would be gathered and returned to the place of YHWH's name if they turned from their unfaithfulness to him. The verb used to express how YHWH communicated this promise to Moses is **צוה**, 'command' or 'instruct'. Within Deuteronomy Moses is called a prophet, and within EN it is the prophets through whom YHWH's commands came (cf. Ezra 9:10-11, a text that would certainly include Moses among the prophets). From the perspective of the narrator of EN, then, Moses would be considered a prophet, and it is his prophetic word that is the focus of Nehemiah's prayer (Baltzer 1991: 128). The structure of Nehemiah 1-2 is thus similar to those of Ezra 1 and Ezra 5. The word of YHWH through his prophet provides the basis for the action to follow, and the Persian king's own deeds are determined such that they conform to YHWH's plan.

Verse 10

As Nehemiah recalls the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, he mentions that YHWH achieved this by his mighty hand. It is YHWH's hand that will be credited for the success Nehemiah attains with Artaxerxes in ch. 2. In chs. 1-2, Nehemiah clearly sees himself as a candidate for and a recipient of the blessings of the covenant between Israel and YHWH. His appropriation of the motif of the hand of YHWH draws a parallel between his interaction with the Persian king and the Israelites' interaction with Pharaoh. As in Exodus, it is YHWH's influence over the king that results in 'deliverance' from distress for his people.

Nehemiah's understanding of and sincere concern for the covenant between YHWH and Israel causes him to rise in the esteem of the implied reader. His opinions and perceptions tend to be viewed as trustworthy and consistent with those of the implied author of EN.

Verse 11

Artaxerxes is obliquely introduced into the narrative of Nehemiah through the request that God grant Nehemiah mercy 'before this man'. Apparently, one of the things Nehemiah prayed about on a regular basis as he contemplated what should be done about Jerusalem was that God would allow him to experience mercy as he interacted with the king (pace Williamson). Nehemiah realised that a successful exchange with the king was essential to any plan for reconstructing the city walls. The way in which he prayed about it suggests that he was not at all confident of a favourable response from Artaxerxes and was rather concerned that he might fall under suspicion of seditious behaviour (Breneman 1993: 173). The implied reader is not encouraged to see Artaxerxes as one who will be sympathetic to Nehemiah's interests; instead, the reader understands that divine intervention is required to bring about the desired result.

It must not be overlooked that Nehemiah does not refer to Artaxerxes as 'the king', but simply as 'this man'. Two points are in order. First, it is likely that a

contrast is intended between the power of YHWH and the power of a mere mortal (Fensham 1982: 157). But the result is that in the eyes of the reader Artaxerxes is brought down off of his throne to the same level as other men. Second, the idiom 'this one' is often used contemptuously in the HB (Clines 1984: 140). Thus, Artaxerxes is brought even lower than the regular level of humans. All of this is made the more pronounced by the fact that Artaxerxes has not yet been referred to in this section of narrative either by name or as king (van Wijk-Bos 1998: 53). It is only in the next sentence that the identity of 'this man' is revealed.

Blenkinsopp writes that "'This man' . . . contrasts sharply with allusions to Persian kings in the official correspondence in Ezra and dramatises the distinction between official, public attitudes and private convictions' (1988: 210). He is correct in the view that those documents presented in EN as being of a public character do not directly disclose the narrator's point of view. The implied reader recognises that, as part of public discourse, such documents were worded according to the conventions of the day. The implied reader, therefore, takes such documents with a 'grain of salt'. Just as modern scholars can recognise the distinction between public and private displays of attitude, so the implied reader of EN can tell the difference between the voice of the narrator and the voice of a character, and looks for the narrator's purpose in including a document authored by another. The implied reader is more likely to adopt the perspective of the narrator or the characters Ezra and Nehemiah than that reflected in government propaganda.

There are several HB passages in which the theme of God granting mercy to his people before their captors appears.⁹¹ Baltzer demonstrates that the prayer of dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8 is likely presupposed by Nehemiah's prayer (1991: 125-26). He goes on to point out:

The two preceding verses in 1 Kgs 8:50b-51 are lacking in the Chronicler's exposition. This unit might help explain a problem at the end of Nehemiah's prayer. The final sentence reads: 'and grant him [thy servant] mercy in the sight of this man' (v. 11). 1 Kgs 8:50b has 'and grant them mercy in the sight of those who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them'. Nehemiah

⁹¹ E.g., 1 Kgs. 8:50; Dan. 1:9; Jer. 42:12; Ps. 106:46; 2 Chron. 30:9.

can hardly say of his master, the Persian king Artaxerxes, that he is one who carries away and holds captive, so he simply says 'this man'. But anyone sensitive to the connection with 1 Kgs 8:46-50 and aware of the familiar wordplay שָׁבָה ('deport') and שׁוּב ('repent, turn around') knows what is being said. It requires a miracle to turn the situation around (compare chap. 2). To such a situation the prayer of petition in Neh 9:32-37 speaks in no uncertain terms. But does Nehemiah feel particularly at ease in his role under 'this man' (הַאִישׁ הַזֶּה)? (1991: 127).

In light of the connection between Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians presumed throughout EN, Nehemiah may well be seen by the implied reader to equate Artaxerxes with his captors. Baltzer's observation about the connection between 1 Kings 8 and Nehemiah's prayer strengthens the possibility that he views Artaxerxes in this way. This tends to cast Artaxerxes in the role of a captor whose good graces cannot be presumed (Smith-Christopher 2001: 318).

An issue that has been met before concerns the use of the word עֶבֶד, 'servant'. Nehemiah's copious use of the term clearly conveys the idea that he sees himself and his people as servants of YHWH. By contrast, however, he does not refer to himself or the king in this prayer in any way that would suggest that he sees himself as the king's servant. Since his prayer was presumably uttered in private, it represents his honest estimation of circumstances. Of course, when in the king's presence, he will use the appropriate deferential speech. This is consistent with the earlier observation that the Judeans see themselves as voluntary servants of YHWH and not as voluntary servants of the Persian king.

As at Ezra 7:27; 9:9, there is a grammatical uncertainty about whether Nehemiah is requesting mercy from YHWH in the presence of the king, or for YHWH to give Nehemiah the king's mercy (i.e., make the king merciful toward him). As in the earlier passages, it is unclear that the choice makes much difference. The point remains the same. Nehemiah is requesting that YHWH intervene in his interaction with the king so that the king will accede to his request and bring about the desired result. The text seems to envisage that Nehemiah has a similar sort of relationship with Artaxerxes as Ezra had. Neither felt confident of a positive reply from the king before it actually occurred. When it did happen, Ezra was overwhelmed with the sense that YHWH had intervened on his behalf. In the present

passage, by hearing Nehemiah's prayer before the event occurs, the reader learns that Nehemiah will view a positive reply as divine intervention.

The narrative moves directly from the prayer of Nehemiah to the incident where he makes his request of the king. The bridge between these two parts is the bare mention of the background information that Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer. By placing ch. 1 and ch. 2 next to each other, the narrator prompts the implied reader to see that the events of ch. 2 are an answer to the prayer of ch. 1 and, therefore, the work of God (Karrer 2001: 197). Without the background of ch. 1, the reader may simply assume that the king responded as he did because of a kind disposition toward Nehemiah. The narrator has attempted to steer the reader away from such a view. In Ezra 1 and 5, a similar effect was achieved by making mention of the word of YHWH through his prophets. The ensuing actions of the kings in those passages were then presented as the fulfilment of the prophetic word.

Nehemiah 2

Verse 1

The reader receives clarification that the king in question is Artaxerxes, and that the ensuing events occurred in the same year as the praying recorded in ch. 1.⁹² Indications are that this is the same king who sent Ezra to Judah in the seventh year of his reign (Ezra 7:7). The similarities between the experiences of Ezra and Nehemiah with this king thus contribute to a consistency of characterisation.

Since the date given in Neh. 2:1 is the month of Nisan, it would seem that Nehemiah had been praying for at least three months (cf. Neh. 1:1). Some have proposed that the king may have been absent from Susa in Babylon, or that there may have been a rota of cupbearers (see Williamson 1985: 178). Holmgren, however, has suggested that the delay may reflect the 'delicacy' of Nehemiah's request (1987: 95). Given the fact that there is no mention of waiting for the king to

⁹² An anonymous individual is more likely to be seen as a mere agent. Similarly, when a character's typical role or mere agency is emphasised, they seem like less of an individual, see above, p. 39.

return or for Nehemiah to take a turn, while on the other hand there is indication that Nehemiah was anxious about the outcome of his anticipated request, it seems most natural to follow the direction hinted at by Holmgren. The specification of the months involved thus serves to inform the implied reader that Nehemiah felt the need to pray for some time about this venture before his climactic encounter with the king. The detail adds to the sense of drama and indirectly heightens the impression of the king as one whose support cannot be counted on. In Josephus's version of this story, Nehemiah goes immediately to the king (*Ant.* 11.163). Josephus seems to have wanted to portray Nehemiah as a 'loyal servant of the Persian king on very good terms with him' (Feldman 1992: 188). While the narrator of EN certainly does not portray Nehemiah as an antagonistic rebel against the king, the biblical text does not betray the same aims as Josephus on this matter.

The detail of carrying the wine to the king leads the reader to believe that Nehemiah is reporting this scene as he remembers experiencing it and, hence, from his own perspective. Since Nehemiah is not an omniscient narrator, his report of the conversation with Artaxerxes contains many gaps for the reader, resulting in a significant amount of ambiguity. This seems to have suited the implied author's purpose. The point is that the exchange between Nehemiah and the king, although fraught with danger, resulted in Nehemiah receiving what he sought, and this is attributed to YHWH's influence on his behalf. It may be unclear exactly who understood what during the encounter, and in this respect the passage is similar, on a smaller scale, to the dialogue of David and Uriah in 2 Sam. 11:7-13 (Sternberg 1985: 201-09).

Verse 2

This is the first example of an actual conversation between the king and another character in EN. It gives the reader a window, albeit small, through which to assess the nature of the relationship between Nehemiah and Artaxerxes, and to gain more information about the king.

Artaxerxes asks Nehemiah why his face is sullen. He adds his perception that Nehemiah is not sick and concludes that Nehemiah must have a heavy heart. This is

practically an accusation. By eliminating the possibility of sickness as a cause for Nehemiah's demeanour, Artaxerxes restricts it to the realm of his attitude. 'Court etiquette required a cheerful and pleasant demeanour (cf. Dan. 1). Any hint of moroseness could arouse suspicion of intrigue' (Blenkinsopp 1988: 213-14). Therefore, Nehemiah has become suspect in the king's mind. If the last phrase of v. 1 is understood to mean that Nehemiah had not *previously* been sad in the king's presence (as in most modern translations), then it likely implies that he was sad on this particular occasion, and the king has taken note of it.

Nehemiah's response is completely intelligible. He is aware that he has come under suspicion and becomes greatly afraid.⁹³ If he had not been sad in the king's presence before, but was intentionally so now, as many commentators suggest (e.g. Allen 2003b: 93), then it is odd that he should become so frightened at *this* particular point. He would surely have foreseen this eventuality and planned for it. On the other hand, if he was not intending to show his feelings, his sudden fear is more understandable (Clines 1984: 141). When he heard the king's question, Nehemiah knew he was potentially in a lot of trouble. Whether Nehemiah intended to show sadness to the king or not (or even whether the king was correct in detecting it), the characterisation of Artaxerxes emerges from Nehemiah's response to the observation the king makes. It is hard to agree with those commentators who see here evidence of humane concern for Nehemiah on Artaxerxes' part (e.g. Clines 1984: 142). If this were the correct interpretation, then the reader must conclude that Nehemiah completely misunderstood the king's intentions.

Verse 3

Nehemiah first responds to Artaxerxes' question with the customary deferential speech. While this in itself would not be sufficient to allay the king's suspicions, it at least adopts the politically and socially appropriate stance toward him. It is the right thing to do if one's allegiance is questioned and one wishes to re-affirm that

⁹³ Nehemiah as narrator provides the reader with important information through narrative discourse, in this case, a telescoped inside view, see above, p. 37.

allegiance. This is the only place in EN where there is any claim of Judean loyalty to the Persian throne. Without a pause, however, Nehemiah continues on. Judging that the circumstances are providential, he takes up the issue of his sad face (whether it really was sad or not) and uses it to broach the subject that has been on his mind.

The king had asked Nehemiah 'Why is your face sad?' Nehemiah carefully uses the same wording to reply 'Why should my face not be sad?' This is a way of implying that what he is about to tell the king will adequately account for what Artaxerxes has observed (or thinks he has observed). It is an attempt to assure the king that there is not some other, nefarious cause of his sadness. The reason he then gives is that a certain city is desolate and has had its gates burned with fire. He identifies this city only as 'the house of my fathers' graves'. Many readers have noticed that Nehemiah avoids mention of the name 'Jerusalem' throughout this exchange. Most commentators think that Artaxerxes must have known what city Nehemiah was talking about, and that Nehemiah was simply avoiding actual mention of the name to give its identity as low a profile as possible in the conversation, not wishing to stir up any negative associations the king might make with it (e.g. Allen 2003b: 93-94). The implied reader would not assume that Nehemiah would be able, or even try, to keep the city's identity a secret from Artaxerxes indefinitely. However, in the conversation as it appears in EN, Nehemiah studiously avoids mention of the city's name. He does not even mention the need to repair the walls of the city, referring only to its gates. The impression given is that when the king agrees to Nehemiah's request, he knows only that the city in question is in Judah and currently lies in a state of desolation, and that Nehemiah's ancestors are buried there. This way, the problem is framed for Artaxerxes such that the actual identity of the city is not an issue. It is unclear at this point in the narrative what the chronological relationship is between this chapter and the correspondence between Artaxerxes and Rehum in Ezra 4. After the reader learns that Nehemiah's wall-building enterprise was successful, it follows that Nehemiah 1-13 must follow Ezra 4 chronologically. The implied reader is already aware, however, that the potential for the Persian king to associate Jerusalem with rebellion, and therefore oppose construction of its walls, is present. Thus, Nehemiah's reticence with respect to the city's name seems well-

advised.⁹⁴ The rhetorical tactics to which Nehemiah resorts indicate that he did not feel confident of the king's support in this matter.

In place of an identifying name, Nehemiah describes the city as the 'house of [his] fathers' graves'. This detail also gives pause for comparison with Ezra 4. In Rehum's letter to Artaxerxes, Jerusalem was characterised as a hotbed of rebellion. Nehemiah presents it as a place whose occupants lie in graves! Obviously the king would assume that there were some living residents in the city. But the effect of the impression created by the description used should not be underestimated. Nehemiah presents himself as a subject of the king with no interest in rebellion, whose only source of sadness would be eliminated if he were allowed to go to the city where the family cemetery is located and rebuild it. This has much less potential to be threatening to Artaxerxes than a reference to a city with a long history of rebellion, poised on the brink of a new outbreak.

Nehemiah frames his total response to the king's question in the form of a rhetorical question. This is also a smart strategic move. Asking a question instead of making a statement implies that he defers to the king's judgment. It is a rhetorical question, however, since it implies that anyone would be sympathetic to Nehemiah's situation. It provides an answer to Artaxerxes' concern that should be both informative and reassuring. But beyond that, it provides opportunity for the king's active sympathy for Nehemiah to be aroused (cf. Neh. 1:11). It is not just that Nehemiah is not plotting something threatening; he actually has a real problem of his own (Klein 1999: 756). The question leaves it to Artaxerxes to decide whether to carry on the conversation, now that he knows what Nehemiah's sadness stems from (Williamson 1985: 179).

There is, of course, much more to Nehemiah's motivation than his ancestors' graves. The implied reader learned in Nehemiah 1 that his primary concern was for the survivors of the exile, not for the dead. Nehemiah sees his potential actions as part of a much larger program than what he reveals to the king. The implied reader

⁹⁴ Prolepsis strongly influences the reader's understanding of action in a narrative, see above, p. 50.

sees again the pattern that has been observed in previous episodes in EN. The narrator and the Judean characters see events from a broad perspective that places them in the context of YHWH's covenant with Israel and are thus able to see YHWH's hand behind those events. The Persian kings, on the other hand, have a much more limited perspective. Their decisions are made according to the conventional customs and values of the ancient Near East, without a true awareness of their significance for YHWH's relationship with his people.

Verse 4

Having heard Nehemiah's description of his dilemma, Artaxerxes decides to pursue the matter further. Nehemiah's rhetorical question had left open both the option to drop the matter and the option to pursue it further. The king chooses to give him the opportunity to make a request about his concern. Now that Artaxerxes has some knowledge of the matter, Nehemiah sees this opportunity as his *great* opportunity. So he prays to the God of heaven. This action reminds the reader of Nehemiah's prayer prior to this moment and ensures that the events taking place are understood as an answer to the earlier prayer. Since the request to God comes before the request to the king, it is reiterated that God is seen as the real source to which Nehemiah is looking for help. If Artaxerxes helps Nehemiah, it will be because God caused him to. The king is completely unaware of this plot taking place behind the scenes. Of course, given the fear Nehemiah had expressed to the reader and the care with which he framed his reply so as not to provoke Artaxerxes' displeasure, part of the motivation for Nehemiah's prayer at this point is probably due to the risk involved in the request he is about to make. At this stage of the narrative, the implied reader must assume that Nehemiah is aware of the edicts of Cyrus and Darius, and Artaxerxes' own earlier letter given to Ezra. Yet there is no presumption on Nehemiah's part that this king will have a favourable attitude toward him or the Judeans in general (Karrer 2001: 192). It may be added that despite the cultic language used by Artaxerxes in Ezra 7, and despite Nehemiah's own understanding of the desolation of Jerusalem in cultic terms, Nehemiah seems not to expect that the king would understand his perspective or be supportive of it. Dozeman states that

the commission of Nehemiah in this chapter is political, not religious (2003: 462). But by including the prayer of Nehemiah 1, the narrator has cast Nehemiah's project in religious terms. Its characterisation as political in ch. 2 reflects the way it was to be perceived from the Persian side. The implied reader understands that the Persians cannot be expected to understand or be sympathetic to the religious concerns of the Judeans. Everything must be framed for them in terms that reflect the broader ancient Near Eastern culture. This reinforces the implied reader's earlier perception that Artaxerxes was acting in Ezra 7 according to traditional ancient Near Eastern norms and was not to be mistaken for a Yahwist.

Verse 5

As Nehemiah makes his request, he is careful to begin with the correct deferential speech. His request is to be granted only if it pleases the king and if Nehemiah himself is pleasing to the king. Nehemiah refers to himself as the king's servant. In all of the other instances in EN in which a Judean is called a עַבְדִּי of the Persian king, it has the negative connotation of being a slave. The context in which Nehemiah's speech occurs, making a significant request of the king immediately after he has come under suspicion by him, makes it unavoidable for Nehemiah to use such language. Although the implied reader recognises the introduction to Nehemiah's request as largely rhetorical, there is a connection with previous episodes in EN to be observed. The issue at hand is framed in terms of what is good for the king of Persia, so that the king believes that the decision he renders is ultimately advantageous for him. This was clear in the case of the edict of Darius in Ezra 6, and the rescript of Artaxerxes in Ezra 7. As the discussion of the edict of Cyrus in Ezra 1 showed, the same element was also recognisable there, although not stated explicitly. The contrast between divine and imperial interests is sharpest in the present passage, however. In the previous passages, the king always made reference to Israel's god in some way. In this chapter Nehemiah does not mention religious interests at all, even though they seem to be his primary motivation. Accordingly, the king does not either.

Nehemiah then makes his specific request. He asks that the king send him to this city of his ancestors' tombs so that he may rebuild it. He spells out that the city is in Judah, which may or may not have been information known to Artaxerxes. Some have suggested that at this point in history Artaxerxes was interested in shoring up the Persian defences in the western part of the empire (Hoglund 1992: 166-205). It is possible that Nehemiah makes mention of Judah to take advantage of this interest on the king's part. Desolate cities in that region would be a liability to the empire as a whole, but fortified ones would be an asset. Nehemiah asks that the king send him to this city. This would make him the king's envoy, on the king's business. The implication is that the rebuilding will be of some benefit to the king. Still, however, he does not mention the name of Jerusalem.

Although it is unclear at what point Artaxerxes realises that Jerusalem is the city in question, Nehemiah's request makes it possible for the king to save face while the city is rebuilt. Artaxerxes' closing words in Ezra 4 (v. 21) gave the impression that the issue for him was the preservation of his royal prerogative. It was not that the construction of the city walls was inherently a bad thing, it was only so if undertaken without his order by Judeans bent on rebellion. His discussion with Nehemiah allows him to order the city walls rebuilt by the hand of his cupbearer, who was concerned only to respect his ancestors. Presumably he could trust such a one.

As the account presented in EN has it, it may be said that the king is stirred to action by Nehemiah's request. It is not the king's own initiative that led him to authorise the rebuilding of Jerusalem. There is a parallel in each of the other accounts of Persian assistance. In Ezra 1 it is YHWH himself who stirs Cyrus to action, in Ezra 6 it is the memorandum of Cyrus that motivates Darius and in Ezra 7 it is Ezra's request that prompts Artaxerxes. While YHWH is understood in each case to be ultimately responsible for the king's beneficial actions, the narrative is also explicit that initiative comes from some other source. This serves to undermine the perceived sovereignty of the kings.

Verse 6

Before the substance of the king's response to Nehemiah's request is reported, the detail is added that the queen was sitting beside the king.⁹⁵ It is not immediately clear what the significance of this circumstance is. In the present context, it seems to be a factor in the king's decision. Ancient historians, such as Ctesias, portrayed Artaxerxes as particularly subject to the influence of women (Blenkinsopp 1988: 215). Clines suggests that the king may have 'wanted to make a display of his generosity before her' (1984: 143). Some such interpretation seems likely. Whatever the exact nature of the queen's influence, it seems that on the human level the narrator attributes to it a large part of the reason for the king's decision.

Artaxerxes replies with yet another question. He asks Nehemiah how long he will be gone. Nehemiah understands this to mean that the king was pleased to send him. The climactic moment of the conversation has now passed. Once more, the Persian king acts to further the Judean post-exilic restoration. Once again, it is portrayed as being the result of divine intervention, this time an answer to Nehemiah's prayers. Artaxerxes' own reasons for this are ultimately not stated, requiring the reader to fill the gap by inference from the data provided in the narrative and from general knowledge of the typical behaviour of kings.⁹⁶

Verse 7

The favourable response to his request has further emboldened Nehemiah, and he makes additional requests, even though these, as Williamson points out, are uninvited (1985: 180-81). Among his requests, Nehemiah asks for a guarantee of safe passage to Judah. Even at this stage of the negotiations, he does not specify the name of the city. He also asks for timber for the construction of three specific items. These are the gates of the temple citadel, the walls of the city, and the house

⁹⁵ This information seems to be significant, since the narrator has interrupted the dialogue to provide stage notes. See above, p. 37.

⁹⁶ Readers are expected to bring expectations of historical characters, especially types, with them to texts, see above, p. 33.

Nehemiah himself is to occupy. It is interesting that the undertaking that will occupy the major portion of the narrative for the next several chapters is placed in the second position on the list, where it attracts the least attention. If Artaxerxes was concerned about fortifying the western portion of the empire, the work on the citadel gates would probably be of most interest to him (cf. Allen 2003b: 96). This is the item Nehemiah places first. The requirement for Nehemiah to have a suitable house to occupy is a personal and pragmatic concern. It is almost as if Nehemiah wishes to avoid drawing the king's attention to the need to rebuild the city walls in light of the earlier order issued by the same monarch to cease and desist from such activity. 'Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem' was a phrase Nehemiah seemed to eschew in the king's presence. The irony is that this is precisely what he is up to. The narrative presents him tiptoeing around his main goal, even as he secures permission and the necessary means to achieve it from the king.

Verse 8

Many scholars have asserted that Artaxerxes was open to Nehemiah's plan because of his confidence in Nehemiah's loyalty (Karrer 2001: 193; Klein 1999: 756). It is clear that Nehemiah had earned a high degree of trust, since he had been appointed cupbearer. In the narrative, however, Nehemiah himself makes no claims to loyalty. While he apparently has no plans to overthrow the king or cause him harm, at every point in the story he appears much more concerned about the welfare of the Judeans than about the welfare of the Persian ruler. In light of the earlier correspondence in Ezra 4, it would seem to have been advisable for Nehemiah to make some kind of statement to allay the king's possible apprehensions about rebellion in Jerusalem. But rather than directly claiming loyalty to Artaxerxes, Nehemiah instead avoids mention of Jerusalem altogether, and even avoids direct reference to the activity of wall-building until his requisition order for supplies makes mention of it unavoidable. His way of dealing with the question of loyalty is very indirect: try to keep the subject from coming up. Artaxerxes may be confident of Nehemiah's loyalty, but his highest loyalty appears to lie elsewhere. Again, the king does not see what the reader sees.

Nehemiah informs the reader that the king gave these things to him in accordance with the hand of his God upon him. The similar wording is reminiscent of Ezra in Ezra 7:6. In both passages the provision given by the king is subordinated to the provision of YHWH. Nehemiah underlines that this response of the king is really an answer to Nehemiah's prayers. There is no statement here of the king himself being generous or kind. The king did what he did because the hand of Nehemiah's God acted on his behalf for good. We may once again contrast Josephus's account of events, in which the role of God is omitted altogether at this point (*Ant.* 11.166), and in which Nehemiah is said to thank the king for his promise to help (*Ant.* 11.167).

Karrer draws attention to the fact that in Nehemiah 2 God's hand is said to be upon Nehemiah, with no mention of God working directly upon the king (2001: 198). She contrasts this with Ezra 1, where God works directly on the king's spirit. It is true that there is a difference in terms of grammar. The direct object is Cyrus in Ezra 1, and the object of the preposition is 'me' (= Nehemiah) in Nehemiah 2. But Neh. 2:8 states that the reason the king gave Nehemiah what he asked was that God's hand was upon Nehemiah. It does not imply that the king recognised the divine hand on his cupbearer. The only possible conclusion to draw is that God's hand on Nehemiah caused the king to grant Nehemiah's request. It is inescapable that God is portrayed in this account as having influenced the king. The only distinction that may be drawn is that in the case of Artaxerxes, perhaps the narrator is suggesting that God influenced the king through Nehemiah, whereas in Ezra 1 there is no intermediary. But whatever conclusions are drawn about this more narrow issue, it may not be supposed that the king's action was any less attributable to God's intervention.

The account of Nehemiah's interaction with Artaxerxes is given with great economy. It may or may not have all taken place at once. The impression the reader is left with, however, is that Nehemiah made a number of bold requests, and the king granted all of them. This strengthens the sense that God was working behind the scenes, and that the king was completely subject to his will.

This episode displays similarity to those of Ezra 1 and 7 on the levels of plot (travel to Jerusalem by order of the king) and theme (YHWH's decisive influence).⁹⁷ This encourages the perception of the Persian kings as a single type, rather than individual characters. They function similarly in each episode.

Verse 9

The armed escort with which Nehemiah was provided was standard procedure (Hallock 1969: 40-44). The mention of it here helps the reader to understand how it was that Nehemiah was initially able to press ahead with his plan in the face of opposition. It also provides an appropriate reversal of the situation in Ezra 4, where the enemies of the Judeans, upon receipt of the letter from the king, used military force to stop the building of the city walls. Now the officials receive letters in support of wall construction (Dozeman 2003: 462), and the military presence is there to enforce this new turn of events. Since Nehemiah was on official business, however, the provision of soldiers and cavalry does not reflect special favour on the part of the king towards him.

Verse 10

When Sanballat and Tobiah hear of Nehemiah's arrival, the reader is told that it greatly displeased them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. Throughout the remainder of the narrative of EN, there is a running feud between Nehemiah and the local officials. The underlying issue is the good of the people of Israel. Nehemiah is for it, his enemies are against it. The struggle often appears personal, with Nehemiah himself becoming the focus of their attacks. It is interesting, however, that there is no mention in this narrative of the enemies complaining of the king himself trying to help the Judeans. It seems that in this

⁹⁷ On the effects of such similarity of presentation, see above, p. 51. Artaxerxes does not display any traits other than those associated with non-Judean kings in general. This confirms his typical role in the narrative. See further above, p. 53.

struggle the king is seen by both sides as at best a tool to be manipulated. Nehemiah has succeeded in convincing him to support the rebuilding effort for the present. In Neh. 6:6-7 Sanballat will threaten to let the king hear that Nehemiah is seeking to become a king in Judah. It is as if both sides think that the king may be influenced for their purposes, and is therefore not aware of how things really stand.

Verse 18

After his reconnaissance tour of the Jerusalem walls, Nehemiah makes his suggestion to the other Judeans that they rebuild the city wall so as to be in disgrace no longer. His use of the verb *נבנה*, 'let us rebuild', alerts the reader to an important development within the narrative. In Ezra 1 the exiles were enjoined by Cyrus to go up to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. In Nehemiah 2 the work of rebuilding continues, but it is now, though still authorised by the Persian king, much more the result of initiative on the part of Nehemiah and the other Judeans. Throughout EN, the Persian kings play an important role in prompting or allowing the work of restoration to take place. Once they have played their formal role, however, it is inevitably the Judeans themselves who are portrayed as effecting the results. All they achieve is attributed ultimately to the blessing of YHWH, and this includes his intervention on their behalf to secure the king's co-operation. But this same sequence may be observed on the level of the narrative as a whole. At the beginning of EN, YHWH initiates the restoration by directly prompting Cyrus to issue an edict. Once the restoration is underway, the Judeans increasingly take the initiative to keep the momentum going. By the narrative of Nehemiah 1-2, the initiative is with the Judeans entirely, and the king has been relegated to the role of helper. In the political world, his authorisation is still essential. But from the narrator's perspective, the Judeans are the initiators, and the king responds to them. The one thing that hasn't changed, however, is that the work of YHWH in accordance with his word through his prophets still has the pre-eminent place in dictating the course of events.

Nehemiah tries to persuade his listeners to agree to his plan by telling them that God's hand had been favourable upon him. He also tells them what the king said to

him. Maintaining this order implies two things. First, it gives precedence to God's gracious provision over that of the king (Williamson 1985: 191). Second, it also insinuates that the king's help was a result of God's gracious provision. Both of these implications have already become apparent for the implied reader in this episode, and the fact that Nehemiah's speech reiterates them serves to underline them.

Verses 19-20

The opponents of Nehemiah attempted rhetorically to set the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls at odds with loyalty to the Persian king. Nehemiah's response to their charges is rather interesting. He addresses what he perceives to be the real issues behind their words. To their mockery he replies that the God of heaven is the one who will give them success. Although Sanballat and company think the Judeans have little chance of succeeding in their endeavour, Nehemiah declares that his confidence is in a higher power. The second issue he addresses is one that was suppressed in their mocking statements to the Judeans. It is that Sanballat and the others are actually concerned about their loss of influence in Jerusalem, and this is the cause of their opposition. On this matter he insists that these opponents have no right to exercise influence in Jerusalem. These are clearly the most significant issues for the character Nehemiah and, probably, for the narrator as well. What is not of equal significance for Nehemiah or the narrator is the question of loyalty to Persian rule. Nehemiah does not protest his loyalty to his opponents. He does not refer to the imperial support for his project as a basis for confidence that it will succeed. His opponents raised the issue of rebellion, but Nehemiah did not address it. Moreover, he declares that he and the other Judeans are servants of the God of heaven, with no mention of being servants of the Persian king. The use of such language makes it clear where the emphasis is placed. This makes it difficult to maintain an interpretation of EN which holds that one of the narrator's purposes is to recognise the legitimacy and beneficial efficacy of Persian rule for Israel. Nehemiah's confidence is not in imperial authorisation, and while he does not raise a revolt in Judah, neither does he verbally confirm his loyalty to Persia. As Nehemiah 1 showed, the primary realm in which history is worked out, in Nehemiah's view, is the

religious or theological realm. This perspective is maintained throughout Nehemiah 1-6, which sees events as an extended contest between the enemies of the Judeans and God (Blenkinsopp 1988: 225).

Japhet has noted that in most of the narrative of Nehemiah, particularly from ch. 3 onwards, 'the figure of the king recedes into the background' (1982: 75). She writes that the actions of God on behalf of his people are 'performed directly through Nehemiah and those assisting him'. She sees this as a contrast with the first part of EN. Yet even in the first part of the narrative, the temple building is performed by the Judeans. It is Ezra who will teach the law to the Israelites and who delivers the silver and gold from Babylon. The Persian king is more prominent in Ezra than in Nehemiah, but his role is largely the same. He assists the Israelites in restoring the temple and worship. After the rescript of Artaxerxes in Ezra 7, the king himself is not a participant in events in the next three chapters. Ezra exercises the authority he has from the king quite independently. The emphasis throughout the narrative is on the restoration of Judah and the main actors are the Judeans themselves. The king plays only the role of enabler, giving the royal permission necessary in the historical context and supplying material provision.

Nehemiah 3-4

The rest of the narrative about the wall-building in Jerusalem makes little direct reference to the king, as mentioned above. The lack of reference, however, contributes to the overall characterisation of the king in certain instances. For example, Neh. 4:9-15 recounts the steps the Judeans took to ward off the threat of military attack by their enemies. Although Nehemiah had been provided with troops on his journey to Jerusalem, apparently the king's provision did not address the challenge Nehemiah faced subsequently. The implied reader gets the feeling that Nehemiah and the Judeans were very much on their own in these circumstances, despite the fact that they had imperial approval for their endeavour. It is consistent with the observation made earlier in this study that the assistance provided by the Persian kings to the restoration process, although playing a pivotal role at critical points, also seems to be ineffective at other times. Despite the existence of Cyrus's

edict, the construction of the temple ceases for decades, beginning within his own reign. Though Ezra is given a generous donation for use in the temple worship in Jerusalem, he is not provided with any protection for his journey there. The actions of the Persian kings are helpful, it is true, but the help does not seem to last long. On the human level, the momentum must be sustained by the Judeans themselves.

Nehemiah 5

The great problem of indebtedness that many Judeans were facing is introduced. One of the factors contributing significantly to this crisis was the king's tax (v. 4). It has been well established historically that the tax burden was heavy for subjects within the Persian empire (see Breneman 1993: 210). This certainly contributes negatively to the characterisation of the Persian kings within EN. In the discussion of the pros and cons of kingship prior to the institution of the Israelite monarchy, one of the worst effects associated with it was seen to be the appropriation of people and goods by the king for his own purposes (1 Sam. 8:11-18).

Nehemiah 6

Sanballat starts a rumour that Nehemiah intends to have himself proclaimed king. His plan is to have this rumour reach the ears of Artaxerxes (vv. 6-7). It may be that at this point Sanballat was becoming desperate and was grasping for a way to discredit the Judeans. The narrative, however, portrays it as a genuine attempt to discourage them. Nehemiah replies that Sanballat is making the whole thing up, but recognises the intent to dishearten the Judeans and asks for God's strength (vv. 8-9). There is no mention of reassuring communication either from or to him with respect to the king. Instead of continuing to play a central role in the wall-building, the king becomes a peripheral figure. Sanballat and the other enemies of the Judeans do not seem afraid of imperial reprisals for resisting a project that has the king's backing. He even attempts to use the king for his purposes by threatening Nehemiah with the accusation of rebellion. The struggle is between these foes and Nehemiah, and Nehemiah relies only on God for help.

Karrer claims that since Sanballat, an enemy of the Judeans, suggests that Nehemiah wants to be proclaimed king, the narrator must be trying to communicate that it is not in the Judeans' best interests to have a king of their own (2001: 188). The logic of her argument would be more sound, however, if Sanballat were suggesting that Nehemiah be proclaimed king. As an enemy, Sanballat is simply lying about Nehemiah's intentions in an effort to harm him. All the characters in the story, and probably the narrator as well, agree that for Nehemiah to attempt to become king would be a disastrous move. This is quite different from saying that subservience to Persian rule is to be preferred to independence.

When the wall is finally finished, Nehemiah reports that all the nations around the Judeans knew that the work had been done with the help of their God (v. 15). There is no acknowledgment of the king's involvement, unlike Ezra 6:14. Even the surrounding nations are aware of the help of Israel's god, rather than attributing their success to some cause such as Nehemiah's favour with the king.

Summary/Conclusion

From the beginning of Nehemiah 1, the scene set is one in which Jerusalem languishes, while the Persian king is uninterested in doing anything to help. Nehemiah's prayer for God's assistance prior to his audience with the king maintains the structure of the narrative of EN in which God's actions determine the actions of the king. As in Ezra 1 and 5, there is also a recognition that what is about to transpire has been foretold by God's prophets long ago, portraying the king as an unknowing accomplice in YHWH's plan. Nehemiah's choice of words makes him appear a sincere worshipper of YHWH in contrast to Cyrus, even though there is some overlap in their phraseology. The prayer itself discloses that Israelite independence is part of God's covenant with Israel. This makes anyone who would stand in the way of Israelite independence an opponent of the covenant. The exodus imagery is recalled once again, placing the Persian king in the role of Pharaoh and affirming the primacy of YHWH's role in delivering his people. Nehemiah, like Ezra before him, assumes that Artaxerxes will not be sympathetic to the plight of the Judeans. He also refers to Artaxerxes in a way that de-emphasises his power and the

respect due him as king. This contrasts sharply with the deferential speech he uses in direct conversation with Artaxerxes. Even when speaking to the king, however, Nehemiah seems to avoid the topic of loyalty to the throne as much as possible.

In his encounter with Artaxerxes, Nehemiah understands the king's question about his sadness to be extremely threatening. He carefully constructs his rhetoric so as to make the best possible impression on one whom he assumes may be suspicious and unsympathetic to the concerns of the returned exiles in Jerusalem. The implied reader knows that Nehemiah's specific request to the king is part of a larger plan involving the restoration of his people in and around Jerusalem. This is concealed from the king, however, and reinforces the two-level progression of the narrative previously noted. When Nehemiah again prays to the God of heaven in the middle of his conversation with the king, it firmly fixes the impression that Artaxerxes is seen by him as more naturally an adversary than an ally.

Mention of the queen's presence at the time of Artaxerxes' decision concerning Nehemiah's request appears to provide additional evidence that he was motivated by other than concern for Nehemiah or his people.

After receiving a favourable reply from the king, Nehemiah clearly attributes this good fortune to the hand of YHWH, adopting the perspective on events already seen to be taken by the narrator and Ezra. The initiative in bringing about the restoration on the human plane progressively shifts throughout EN from the king to the Judeans. By Nehemiah 2, it is advancing entirely at their initiative, and the king has been completely relegated to the role of helper.

Although accused of rebellious intentions, Nehemiah affirms his loyalty to YHWH but not to the Persian king. As earlier in the narrative, a tension between serving YHWH and serving the Persian king is maintained. The two are not connected, and for the implied reader priority is given to serving YHWH.

In the chapters between Nehemiah 2 and 9, the Persian king does not seem particularly helpful to the Judeans in the new challenges they face. A similar failure or inability to support was noted in the earlier part of the narrative. This confirms that in the narrative as a whole the Persian king is not a particularly helpful figure for the Judeans, but on specific occasions is moved by YHWH to act on the Judeans'

behalf. The heavy tax burden which the king imposes contributes to the suffering of the returned exiles. When the enemies of the Judeans recognise that the walls have been rebuilt with the help of God, the non-mention of the king is consistent with the narrative view that it is God and not the king who is ultimately more responsible even for the help the king provides.

CHAPTER 9: NEHEMIAH 9-13

Nehemiah 9

Duggan has written, 'The prayer of the Levites (Neh. 9:6-37) is the theological summit of Ezra-Nehemiah. In the narrative unfolding of the whole book, this prayer represents a major reorientation of perspective on a variety of central issues, including: . . . the characterization of the Persian administration' (2001: 230). It is not the purpose of this study to comment on the nature of the relationship between Nehemiah 9 and the rest of EN with respect to issues other than the characterisation of the Persian kings. But with respect to this latter subject, it seems that Nehemiah 9 offers not a reorientation so much as a clarification of what has come before. In what follows, it will be clear that the presentation of the Persian kings in Nehemiah 9 reiterates themes that have already been encountered in the narrative of EN. Whereas the implied author has achieved his effect indirectly in many instances, in this chapter he allows characters within the narrative to put the same ideas across directly.

Newman has pointed out that royal imagery for God is absent from the entire prayer, although it is prominent in passages such as Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1. She surmises that the Judeans' situation of subjugation to foreign kings in the post-exilic period may have made royal theology something of an embarrassment to the author (1999: 69 n. 24). It seems the reason for avoiding the royal theology in EN cannot be determined with confidence. What can be said, however, is that there is no use of kingship terminology in connection with God in the book. It follows that EN does not make use of these concepts to present the Persian king as part of the royal theology the way they were used in connection with David and Solomon. This complete absence in the book is a telling piece of evidence against those who would claim that the Persian kings are presented as the heirs to the Davidic throne. Rather, it seems that in EN the king of Persia does not represent the kingship of YHWH.

Verses 6-31

Throughout the prayer there are allusions that reflect on the characterisation of the Persian kings. Verse 7 tells of God choosing Abram and bringing him out of Ur of the Chaldeans. 'The verb "brought out" . . . used of God's guidance of Abraham from his southern Mesopotamian home in Ur of the Chaldees (cf. Gen 11:28, 31; 15:7), suggests a kind of deliverance, or exodus, also for him (see Exod 20:2; 32:11-12)' (Klein 1999: 810). The next verse recounts God's making of a covenant with Abraham to give him the land of Canaan. Thus, a series of parallels is constructed. Abraham's journey from Ur to Canaan is a sort of exodus, or deliverance. But Abraham's journey from the area of Babylon to Palestine is also parallel to the journey of the exiles from Babylon to Judah. By association, then, the exiles' journey from Babylon to Judah is a kind of exodus, a concept that the implied reader has already met in EN. But the idea of exodus does not only carry with it the concept of geographical displacement. The idea of deliverance requires freedom from slavery. If Abram's journey to receive the land of promise foreshadowed his descendants' passage from servitude to inheritance of that land, then his later descendants, too, should expect that their journey would result in the occupation and ownership of the same land. The only role possible for the Persian king in this scenario is as oppressing ruler from whom deliverance is anticipated. The later portion of the prayer will bear this interpretation out. It may be noted in passing that the analogy with Abraham tends to emphasise God's part in the exiles' departure from Babylon and minimises that of the king.

Verse 15 mentions that YHWH had sworn to give the land to Abraham's descendants. This strongly reiterates the certainty of YHWH's intention to give the land to the Israelites. It is a major emphasis of this prayer. As Clines says, 'we must recognise the contemporary political implications for the post-exilic period of this rehearsal of ancient history' (1984: 195).

The desire of the generation of the first exodus to return to Egypt is mentioned in v. 17. This is characterised as a disobedient act. The text states specifically that they determined to return to their slavery (עבדותם). The only other place where this noun occurs in the HB is in Ezra 9:8-9. There Ezra referred in his prayer to the

slavery the Israelites continued to experience under Persian rule. It is hard to deny that the perspective reflected in EN sees an important parallel between the slavery in Egypt and the community's current subjection to Persia. The implication is that a desire to remain in subjection to Persia would be just as foolish and just as disobedient as was the desire to return to slavery in Egypt. Inheriting the promises is inconsistent with acquiescing in foreign rule (Blenkinsopp 1988: 305).

Verse 22 speaks of YHWH giving kingdoms to the Israelites. The wording matches the statement made by Cyrus in Ezra 1:2 that YHWH has given him all the kingdoms of the earth. In light of this verse, the handing over of kingdoms to Cyrus actually emphasises the judgment on Israel. Whereas they received kingdoms as part of God's covenant with Abraham, they and other kingdoms were subsequently handed over to foreign rulers, of whom the most recent were the Persians. Mention of the dispossessing of kings Sihon and Og may be due to the fact that they were the first ones conquered in connection with the conquest of the land (Fensham 1982: 44), and therefore they may stand for all the others conquered subsequently. Whatever the exact reason for their occurrence here, the fact that they were kings highlights the analogy with the current situation yet again. Rather than merely dispossessing other peoples who were present in the land, the Israelites took possession from kings who were ruling over it. In the narrative, the Israelites currently face a situation in which the land promised to them is ruled over by foreign kings.

With respect to the last word in v. 24, כרצונם, Newman writes,

The last phrase in this long verse, stating that the Israelites were able to do with the kings and peoples of the land 'according to their whim,' . . . is not found in any account of the conquest. It seems rather to be the author's addition to the conquest account which serves a particular rhetorical purpose in the prayer. The phrase recurs in 9:37, the last verse of the prayer, when the pray-er laments their oppression under foreign kings who treat them 'according to their whim' . . . Like the careful use of 'slavery' in both Neh 9:17 and 36, this comparison highlights the fact that in the post-exilic period the tables have been turned; the former conquerors have become the vanquished at the mercy of foreign powers (1999: 94-95).

It may also be noted that the description of the Israelites enjoying the goodness of the land in v. 25 sets up a contrast with their enforced surrender of that goodness to the Persian kings in their present circumstances.

Verse 32

Clines has described this verse as the 'centre of gravity of the prayer' (1984: 192). The desire intimated is that YHWH would release the Judeans from the evil of foreign domination. What was implicit with respect to the current situation in the earlier part of the prayer is brought to explicit expression here.

The hardship they have experienced is described as occurring in a continuous period beginning with the kings of Assyria and extending to the present moment. This emphasises again the identification established among the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians. Although the delivery of Israel into the hands of their enemies is likely understood to have begun even earlier (e.g., in the days of the judges), the period beginning with the Assyrians is identified as distinct in some way. This is likely because it entailed the most intense experience of the loss of the land, the central blessing referred to in this prayer. Beginning with the Assyrians, the Israelites experienced actual deportation, and even those who remained in the land were much less able to enjoy its benefits. As one empire was transformed into another, the experience of the Israelites within it did not change much (Blenkinsopp 1988: 307). Further, this hardship is designated with the same word found at Exod. 18:8 and Num. 20:14 with reference to the slavery in Egypt (van Grol 1999: 216 n. 14). Once again, it appears that the domination by foreign rulers is to be seen as analogous to the time in Egypt.

Verse 33

The prayer continues with the acknowledgement that YHWH is righteous. Earlier, in v. 8, the same assertion was made in connection with YHWH's faithfulness to his promise to Abraham. In the present context, it refers to his judgment on Israel for wickedness (Duggan 2001: 173). His justice is shown, then,

in the present circumstance of servitude to Persia, since that servitude represents due punishment for sin. It is taken for granted that the status under the Persians is one of punishment.

Verse 36

The self-designation as slaves is an element common to this prayer and that of Ezra in Ezra 9:9 (Duggan 2001: 224). The two prayers share the same view of Israel's history in general and the subjugation to foreign kings in particular. It has been noted by Cook that all subjects of the Persian kings were considered their slaves (1983: 132, 249 n. 3). But the present context does not seem to allow for a conventional use of the term. On the other hand, the usage does seem to be metaphorical in some sense, since the community of returned exiles were not functioning as slaves in the same way that their ancestors had according to the narrative preserved in Exodus. It is probably in connection with the Exodus story that the reader is to understand the metaphor of slavery. The subjugation to Assyria, subsequently to Babylonia and currently to Persia, is viewed as comparable to the situation of the Israelite ancestors in Egypt. The parallel is emphasised by the repetition of עֲבָדִים. The natural conclusion is that the Persian kings are seen here primarily as oppressors.

There appears to be an intentional irony based on the use of the root עֲבָד at the end of v. 35 and the beginning of v. 36. Since the Israelites refused to serve YHWH, they were made servants of the foreign kings (Duggan 2001: 197). As in the earlier recorded prayer in Ezra 9:7-9, the current situation is seen not merely as hardship, but as punishment for sin. Servitude to foreigners has theological significance for the community. It is not simply a trial to be overcome, but evidence that all is not as it should be. A similar idea is expressed in Deut. 28:47-48 (van Grol 1999: 209), where warning is given that refusal to serve YHWH in time of prosperity will result in the Israelites serving their enemies in a situation of acute want. There is even the threat that such servitude will result in the Israelites' complete destruction. The theological connection between lack of loyalty to YHWH and subsequent service to foes is evident. The clear parallels between these passages cast the Persian kings in

the role of enemies of Israel. 2 Chron. 12:5-8 may be added to the discussion as well (van Grol 1999: 209). YHWH there states through Shemaiah that, as a result of their abandoning him, he has abandoned them to Shishak (v. 5). He adds that they will serve Shishak so that they may know the difference between serving YHWH and serving the kingdoms of other lands (v. 8).

There is also a further theological connection implied. Not only is servitude to foreign rulers a result of sin, but the act of choosing to serve foreign rulers is itself sin. Neh. 9:17 lists the decision to return to slavery in Egypt among the rebellious acts of the ancestors. It is contrasted with being obedient to YHWH (Davies 1999: 117-18). The implication for the contemporary situation is that choosing to perpetuate their current subservience would be to follow the example of their ancestors. As things stand in narrative time in Nehemiah 9, the Israelites are powerless to do anything about their slavery, much as the ancestors were in Egypt in Exodus. But loving slavery is a mark of the disobedient, inconsistent with gratitude to YHWH for his good plans for them.

This verse also sheds further light on the implied author's perspective relative to the statement of Cyrus in Ezra 1:2. Cyrus claimed that YHWH had given him all the kingdoms of the earth. It is clear now that the community of returned exiles would not dispute that. Cyrus, however, seemed to take the view (or at least wished to propagate the view) that YHWH's choice of him as ruler represented the best interests of YHWH's people. In contrast, the community of exiles sees Persian rule as punishment for sin (cf. v. 37, 'the kings whom you set over us because of our sins'). Thus, although it is agreed that it was YHWH's will to give Cyrus the kingdoms of the earth, the significance of this choice is viewed quite differently by Cyrus and the Israelites. The implied author seems to share the outlook of the Israelite community as it is portrayed in Nehemiah 9.

From a historical perspective, Blenkinsopp has stated that 'there is no reason to believe that [the Persians'] rule was significantly more benign than that of their Semitic predecessors' (1988: 307-08). In particular, he mentions the diversion of local resources to imperial endeavours. The result was that the returned exiles' experience was marked by an awareness of having to give the 'good things of the

land' to the Persian rulers rather than enjoying them for themselves. The historical reality thus corresponds to the picture constructed in the text. This increases the likelihood that the interpretation offered in this study is accurate. It also lends support to the assertion that such a view of the Persian kings is to be assumed throughout EN.

Verse 37

The characteristics of the present 'slavery' are given. The requirement to give the abundant produce of the land to the kings reminds the reader of the king's tax mentioned in Neh. 5:4, which caused so much trouble for the Israelites. The rule over the Israelites' bodies and cattle emphasises the fact that military conscription included the right to requisition animals as well as to enlist troops. The text puts these matters in general terms, however. The effect is to say that the Israelites are completely at the mercy of their Persian overlords. This way of stating things helps explain the analogy with the earlier situation in Egypt, where the Israelites were more literally slaves.

It should not be overlooked that in the following section of the narrative, which reports the firm agreement made by the community, one of the commitments made is to bring the firstborn of their sons and of their livestock to the temple (Neh. 10:37; Duggan 2001: 289). This achieves a contrast between giving people and beasts to the Persians and giving them to YHWH. Continuing to serve the Persians is to some extent incompatible with serving YHWH, as ch. 9 has already implied.

The text describes the control of the Persian kings in terms of their ruling over the Israelites' bodies and animals 'according to their pleasure'. This underscores yet again the sense of reversal with respect to YHWH's original plan for Israel. In v. 24 it was said that YHWH gave the kings and peoples of Canaan into the Israelites' hands to do with them 'according to their pleasure'. Now the tables have been turned. Furthermore, however, the result of the Persians having such control is that the Israelites are in great need. Smith-Christopher suggests a play on words between רצון and צרה: 'their pleasure is our pain' (2001: 321). It probably is also no coincidence that the root צור occurs four times in Neh. 9:27. It is enemies who cause

Israel to be in distress. The implication within the context, then, is that the present kings of Persia are Israel's enemies.

The association of Israelite and foreign rule with blessing and punishment respectively is consistent with the view expressed earlier that a distinction should be perceived between Persian kings simply acting supportively toward Israel and YHWH intervening to cause Persian kings to act supportively toward Israel. What Nehemiah 9 and Ezra 9 state explicitly may be assumed to be taken for granted elsewhere in the narrative. It is that Persian rule is inherently punishment for Israel, and its end is desired by the implied author. Every mention of action on the part of a Persian king to support the restoration of Israel is therefore ironic. It is out of the ordinary and requires the explanation given in each instance, namely, that YHWH intervened to bring such events about. Far from being evidence of a pro-Persian attitude on the part of the implied author, they point to the perception of YHWH's mercy to Israel in the midst of, and *in spite of* Persian rule.

The structure of the prayer also contributes to the portrayal of the Persian kings. As the history of the people in the land of promise is recounted, a pattern is established. Verses 26-27, 28, 29-31 form three cycles with the following elements: rebellion, handing over to foreign powers, plea for help, God's merciful deliverance (Williamson 1985: 315; Duggan 2001: 166). The third and fourth elements are missing from the last cycle, however. The implication is that the prayer itself functions as the plea for help in the current circumstances, and that God's deliverance is anticipated once again. This places the Persian kings in a position parallel to other foreign dominators in the earlier part of the prayer. It suggests that deliverance from their rule is also anticipated, and that it would be further evidence of God's mercy. It leaves no doubt that Persian hegemony is undesirable in the eyes of the implied author.

The word 'distress' (צָרָה) in v. 37 connects with the earlier use of the same word three times in v. 27. Since the distress was said at that point in the prayer to be the result of deliverance by YHWH into the hands of their enemies for disobedience, it is hard to overlook the implication that the Judeans' present circumstances of

distress are understood as similar punishment by YHWH at the hands of enemies, stemming from disobedience.

One of the concepts that make this prayer distinctive is that the king's standing with YHWH affects the experience of the people for better or worse. This connection was a central tenet of ancient Near Eastern royal ideology (Knoppers 1995: 458 n. 35). It is thus significant that in EN there are no statements evaluating the Persian king's standing with YHWH. Unlike the statements found in Samuel-Kings and Chronicles, which evaluate Israelite monarchs according to their obedience or disobedience to YHWH, the Persian rulers are not evaluated in this way. Instead, their actions which contribute to the well-being of Israel are seen as a result of YHWH's overruling in their inner being. In this way, the emperors' co-operation with YHWH's plans is not viewed as obedience; they are simply pawns. As a result, Israel's blessing is not at all said to be contingent on the standing of the Persian king with YHWH. It is Israel's obedience or disobedience that will determine their fate, independent of what the Persian ruler does. This is clearly the implied author's stance in both Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9. It follows that the king of Persia does not stand in the same relation to Israel as the Israelite monarchs did, in the mind of the implied author.

This conclusion is supported from a different angle by Bliese (1988: 214). His observation is that the structure of the prayer is such that it emphasises the ending. The current distress resulting from subservience to the Persian kings is not merely an unhappy detail but is rather given prominence. Böhler takes up this observation and concludes that the author of EN in its extant form has made political independence the '*Schwerpunkt*' of his composition (1997: 380).

Of course, it is not new to argue that the prayer of Nehemiah 9 portrays the Persian kings as unwanted dominators of Judah. This is freely recognised by most commentators. The recognition is usually accompanied, however, by the further assertion that the prayer is somehow out of keeping with the rest of EN, which, with the exception of Ezra 9, is held to be unswervingly favourable in its portrayal of the Persian kings. Yet, to the contrary, it may be observed that the prayer is essentially 'a confession that elaborates on the contrast between God's acts and Israel's lack of

response in the past . . . which accounts for the contrast between the greatness of God and the misery of his people in the present . . .' (Duggan 2001: 163). This is the very pattern that is repeated within EN as a whole. From the very first chapter of Ezra, YHWH is seen acting on Israel's behalf to bring about restoration and blessing. He is able to overcome every hurdle placed in their path by those outside the community. The greatest threat to the restoration program comes not from without, but from within the community itself. As the prayer of Ezra 9 and the complex of Nehemiah 9-10 make crystal clear, the theological concern is whether the community of returned exiles will be obedient to YHWH. When the larger picture is appreciated, it is evident that the 'benevolent' acts of the Persian kings are primarily acts of God on Israel's behalf, and the outlook of Nehemiah 9 fits comfortably within the thought of the book as a whole. Thus, the message of the whole is the same as the message of the parts. In each episode the narrator has placed details that direct the reader to understand the help given by the Persian rulers as evidence of YHWH's goodness demonstrated through the surprising behaviour of otherwise hostile foreign rulers. When the flow of history as a whole is summarised, it is again YHWH's goodness that is emphasised, and the role of foreign rulers is primarily that of oppressor. Duggan sees a contrast between the prayer and the rest of the book in respect of the portrayal of God's actions. He says that the prayer highlights divine intervention while EN otherwise depicts God as acting indirectly (2001: 230-31). It seems likely, however, that the parallel is intended to highlight the similarities rather than the differences. The very point seems to be that God's indirect actions—his 'interior persuasions', as Duggan refers to them—are in fact his interventions. This allows the narrative as it stands to be read in a coherent way. It is consistent with the presumption that the intentions of the implied author are perceived through the coherence of the text.

Similar considerations obtain with respect to the portrayal of the Persian kings in Nehemiah 9 in comparison with their portrayal in earlier portions of EN. A very common understanding is that the description in Nehemiah 9 of the Persians as oppressors is at variance with their depiction as sponsors and patrons of the reconstruction and restoration elsewhere (Duggan 2001: 231). Such an approach,

however, runs the risk of losing sight of the forest while examining the details of individual trees. A common theme uniting the entire narrative of EN, and the episodes involving Persian kings in particular, is the sovereignty of YHWH and his utilisation of any means he chooses to achieve his ends. So, the Persian kings are at one time his tools to discipline Israel and at another his tools to bring about Israel's restoration. The differences in *how* they are used are not as important as *that* they are used by YHWH. The implied author sees both kinds of cases as illustrative of his overarching idea.

These observations return us to the question of the basis on which Nehemiah 9 has been assigned to a hand different from the majority of EN. Karrer has also concluded that the reports of the actions of the Persian kings in Ezra 1-7 contribute to a picture of God as the ultimate arranger of the course of history (2001: 372). This is consistent with the view of Nehemiah 9, not in tension with it. Readers both consciously and unconsciously presume coherence in a text rather than the opposite. It is only at the point where coherence seems difficult or the reader seems to be forcing it on the text that the possibility must be entertained that the text actually lacks coherence. This is not, however, the situation here. Once the observations offered are taken into account, it can be seen that coherence is easily recognised between Nehemiah 9 and the rest of EN. It becomes questionable whether there is any firm basis for assigning the chapter to a writer with a different outlook than that expressed in EN as a whole or in any part of EN.

Such an interpretation of EN resonates more widely with other canonical literature from this period. Bedford has given a summary of the ideology underpinning the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple in Haggai and Zechariah. He ends by saying, 'For the present, Judeans must rebuild the temple, reap some of the blessings attending Yahweh's return to Jerusalem, and wait for Yahweh to act to manifest his kingship' (2001: 260). This is quite clearly in harmony with the outlook expressed in Nehemiah 9. But once the connections between Nehemiah 9 and the rest of EN are appreciated, it is also apparent that the expectations and hopes of EN as a whole are easily reconciled with those of Haggai and Zechariah. Although EN, as a narrative, makes little mention of hopes for the restoration of the Israelite

monarchy (since these were not realised in the period with which it deals), it reflects a perspective that views the contemporary situation as one of continued punishment by YHWH, mercifully attenuated by means of the instances of favour shown through the Persian kings. The immediate concern was to rebuild the temple and provide for the restoration and ongoing support of its services. The people must strive to be faithful to YHWH and wait for him to act decisively to restore indigenous kingship in Judea. The similarity of the stance taken in EN with that in Haggai and Zechariah makes it easier to understand why the narrator is able to refer to these prophets by name with approbation (Ezra 5:1; 6:14).

Nehemiah 10

The importance of the view expressed in Nehemiah 9 for understanding EN as it has come down to us must not be underestimated. Not only does it bring greater clarity to the themes displayed in previous episodes, it also makes a strong statement about the motivation for the community's actions. Nehemiah 10 records the 'firm agreement' (v. 1, NRSV) they make to observe the law of Moses and provide for the temple service. In the context of EN, this appears as corrective action in response to the situation narrated in Nehemiah 9. Since the community was feeling the continued effects of disobedience to YHWH, they committed themselves to obedience. Their hope was to reverse the effects of disobedience. But in Nehemiah 9, the 'effects of disobedience' consist precisely of the experience of subjugation to Persia. Thus, the motivation of the community to obey YHWH is tightly connected to their desire to be rid of Persian domination. Law and temple, two of the most prominent motifs of EN, are presented as deriving at least some of their importance from their association with political independence. This adds to the irony implicit in the support given by Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes for the restoration of the temple (Ezra 1, 6, 7) and the teaching and observance of the law of Moses in Judea (Ezra 7).

Mention of the 'firm agreement' in Nehemiah 10 calls for notice of one of its significant features. It is, on one hand, rather like a covenant. It does not use the typical word for referring to a covenant, ברית, but it does use the regularly-associated verb, כרת. The nature of the agreement is unilateral, without specific

divine prompting. Yet it replicates the function of a covenant renewal. On the other hand, there is no king involved in this agreement. By the complete non-involvement of the Persian king in such an event or document, it is made clear that he does not occupy the theological role of David, Solomon, Hezekiah, Josiah or any other Israelite or Judean king. Persian rulers in EN do not take over where Davidic rulers left off.

Another detail that impacts on the portrayal of the Persian kings is the assumption of the responsibility to collect the temple tax in Neh. 10:33. Duggan notes that this 'represents a move toward greater independence from the Persian administration', since to this point in the narrative generous provisions had been made in this regard by the Persian rulers (2001: 280-81). Whether these provisions had become insufficient, or blocked, or had lapsed is not stated. The point is that the Judeans had to take responsibility for this and were willing to do so. The Achaemenids could not be counted on for this support, and the community was prepared to adopt this ordinarily royal role. It is true that the narrator does not explicitly point out that adequate support from Persia was not forthcoming. At the same time, the implied reader is not surprised at this turn of events and understands the community's donations as a necessary part of maintaining the temple service. This detail supports the interpretation given of the earlier episodes in which generous provision for the temple was made by the Persian kings. The implied reader does not expect such generosity from foreign rulers and sees it as evidence of incontrovertible divine intervention. When, as in Nehemiah 10, the community must rely on its own resources rather than aid from the empire, it is business as usual. The characterisation of the kings at this point, although tacit, is nonetheless perceptible.⁹⁸

Nehemiah 11

Nehemiah 11:24 gives another, oblique, reference to the king. In this instance Pethahiah is said to have been 'at the king's hand' (לִיד הַמֶּלֶךְ) in all matters concerning the people. There is some disagreement over whether this implies that

⁹⁸ Inaction can be just as important for characterisation as action, see above, p. 44.

Pethahiah was resident at the Persian capital or not (Williamson 1985: 352; cf. Clines 1984: 219). At the very least, it seems to require that he regularly reported to the king and was available to him for consultation. This note does underline, however, the foreignness of the king and the subjugated nature of the Judeans in their relationship with him (Holmgren 1987: 143). It is only non-Judean kings who require someone to represent the Judeans to them at their court.

Nehemiah 12

Earlier it was observed that the Judeans who had returned from exile seem to assume some significant roles that usually belong to kings. Nehemiah 12:44-47 appears to provide another example by describing the provision of food for the temple personnel. The narrator makes reference to the state of affairs in the days of David. He then refers to what happened in the days of Zerubbabel and the days of Nehemiah. In this latter period it is all Israel that gives the singers and gatekeepers their due portions. Rather than a king providing for the temple functionaries, it is the people of Israel who are said to have that role.

Nehemiah 13

Verse 6

The final instance of an epithet attached to the name of a Persian king occurs here. Artaxerxes is called 'king of Babylon'. Commentators have felt a need to explain this title, which is attached to Artaxerxes in EN only here. Karrer is unsatisfied with any explanation and concludes that it is hard to know why it appears here (2001: 101 n. 89). Nehemiah the character may use this designation in this passage in connection with his explanation of why abuses occurred in the temple. He was personally absent from Jerusalem in faraway Babylon. He had gone from Jerusalem to the king. The reminder that Artaxerxes was king of Babylon reinforces the necessity for Nehemiah to be so far removed when attending the king. Within the wider context of EN, however, the effect of this epithet is consistent with those that have come before. The reader has encountered Persian kings referred to as 'king

of Persia', 'king of Babylon', and even 'king of Assyria'. The reference to Artaxerxes as king of Babylon reinforces the impression that these titles are interchangeable. The Persian rulers are of a piece with the Assyrian and Babylonian oppressors who preceded them.

Verse 18

A comment provides further insight into the perspective taken by the characters in the narrative concerning Persian rule. Nehemiah's mention of 'all this trouble' (כל־הרעה הזאת) demands interpretation with reference to some present hardship. Since the city walls have been rebuilt, and the temple reconstructed, he is unlikely to refer to the calamities suffered at the hands of the Babylonians. The enduring legacy of the destruction of Jerusalem at that point in time was continued subjugation to foreign rule. Indeed, within the narrative itself, the most likely antecedent of 'this trouble' is the 'great distress' of Nehemiah 9, which is frankly explained as being slaves to the kings YHWH had set over them. Thus, the final chapter of the book contains another reference to the undesirability of rule by the Persian kings, further contributing to their characterisation.

Summary/Conclusion

In contrast with some other passages in the HB, the prayer in Nehemiah 9 does not make use of royal imagery for God. In fact, such imagery is not used for God anywhere in EN. This is consistent with the fact that the kingship of the Persian rulers does not represent or embody the kingship of YHWH for the narrator. Their standing or relationship with YHWH is irrelevant to the blessing the Judeans receive. Since the usual HB and ancient Near Eastern ideology saw an important connection between the king's status with the deity and the blessing received by his people, this tends to portray the Persian king as though he is not the Judeans' king.

The prayer constructs an analogy between Abraham's journey and the exodus, and an analogy between Abraham's journey and the journey of the exiles, thus reinforcing the already noted link between the exiles' journey and the exodus. Once again, the Persian king is in Pharaoh's role, and the goal of the exiles' journey is more

explicitly freedom from his rule. This is supplemented by a parallel established between those who wished to return to Egypt and those who would remain in subjection to the Persians. Beside this, the identification of Persians with Assyrians and Babylonians occurs here as well. Continued Persian rule is viewed as continued punishment for sin. Several features cast them in the role of Israel's enemies. The promise of the land is highlighted in the prayer, and the Persian kings progressively come into view as obstacles to the fulfilment of that promise.

Nehemiah 9 makes the clearest statement that Persian rule is understood as a continuation of YHWH's punishment of his people, and that its end is longed for. Many of the themes present in it, however, are perceptible in other parts of the narrative, even if not so explicitly stated. The study of EN as a narrative whole with respect to the portrayal of the Persian kings leads to the conclusion that Nehemiah 9 is not in tension with the rest of EN on this issue. In fact, EN may be seen to represent a point of view similar to that expressed in Haggai and Zechariah.

The final epithet used in connection with a Persian king, in Neh. 13:6, maintains the usage throughout EN whereby they may be identified with Persia, Babylon or Assyria.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this final chapter is threefold: (1) to provide an overview of the characterisation of the Persian kings as it emerges in EN, (2) to summarise the most prominent themes that come to light and state their significance for the interpretation of EN and (3) to identify some of the wider implications of this study.

Overview of Characterisation

Ezra 1

The characterisation of Cyrus, the first Persian king encountered in EN, begins in this chapter. It is achieved entirely indirectly, through a concise narration of events without description, and through presentation of the words of Cyrus himself. Since the characterisation is indirect, and Cyrus's reported words were intended by him for the public at large, a certain ambiguity attends the picture the implied reader develops of him in this opening chapter. Nevertheless, certain features begin to emerge.

At a foundational level, Cyrus is identified as a non-Israelite. This occurs directly by epithets he and the narrator use and indirectly through his own speech. His actions in the narrative clearly imply that he is the heir to the empire of the Babylonians, yet some of his actions, as well as the epithets applied to him and intertextual allusions, portray him as distinct from his Assyrian and Babylonian predecessors with respect to his treatment of Israelite/Judean exiles.

Cyrus appears through his edict as a typical ancient Near Eastern ruler. All of his words, and his action in making the proclamation itself, are understandable by analogy with the acts of other Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian monarchs, known to modern scholars from extra-biblical literature. The pattern of behaviour to which his actions and words conform appears to have been so well established in the ancient Near East that the implied reader of EN must recognise it. In fact, Cyrus meets the literary criteria for being considered a type, rather than a full-fledged character, since

he exhibits no characteristics that are not part of the general class to which he belongs. The logical inference is that Cyrus's motives for his actions are similar to the motives that other ancient Near Eastern rulers were understood to have.

There is an additional element of the narrative, however, which contributes greatly to the reader's understanding of Cyrus's actions. The narrator states that Cyrus was stirred to make his proclamation by YHWH. Since the general pattern of Cyrus's behaviour is not itself unusual, the implication is that what is unusual, and therefore evidence of YHWH's involvement, is that such a proclamation has been directed toward the exiled Judeans. Thus, although Cyrus's behaviour would generally be understandable without explanation by divine intervention, the narrator makes him appear to be an agent of YHWH.

Careful attention to the structure and wording of the narrative frame preceding the proclamation, as well as to the wording of the proclamation itself, manifests that the narrator depicts Cyrus as unaware of YHWH's influence upon him. Comparison of Cyrus's own understanding of his behaviour, implicit in his depiction as a typical ancient Near Eastern ruler, with the significance attributed to his behaviour by the narrator, reveals an evident difference between them. These factors render Cyrus an unwitting agent of YHWH. The recognition of this state of affairs leads to the conclusion that the narrator is portraying Cyrus as an ironic character, whose actions are understandable at one level as typical of ancient Near Eastern emperors but are ultimately to be understood on a more informed level as the result of YHWH's prompting. Cyrus himself is to be seen as understanding only the basic level, not all that narrator and reader understand. These conclusions are confirmed by contrasting the structure of Ezra 1 with the structure of the Cyrus Cylinder and by identifying several expressions in Cyrus's proclamation in Ezra 1 that have dual meanings for the implied reader but not for Cyrus himself. The observation that Sheshbazzar begins to displace Cyrus in the narrative by taking over roles associated with monarchs contributes further to the identification of irony. Finally, the identification of parallels between the account of the exodus from Egypt and the narrative of Ezra 1, coupled with observations about the narrative structure of Ezra 1, reinforce the

conclusion that the narrator represents Cyrus in a way different from how Cyrus would understand himself.

The fact that Cyrus initiates reconstruction of the Jerusalem temple and plays an active role in raising material support for the venture causes the implied reader to see Cyrus's role in this chapter as helper of the returning exiles. Yet the irony attached to his role prevents the implied reader from having confidence that Cyrus can be relied on to help consistently any more than other Near Eastern rulers with which the reader may be familiar. His help in this episode functions as testimony to YHWH's gracious intervention rather than to a characteristically favourable disposition toward the Judeans on Cyrus's part. Indeed, Cyrus's own phraseology subtly associates him with others whose rule over Israel was evidence of YHWH's judgement upon them.

Ezra 4

Brief mention is made of Cyrus in Ezra 3, and Cyrus, Darius, Artaxerxes and Xerxes are all mentioned in Ezra 4, albeit that mention of Darius and Xerxes is so brief that it does not substantially contribute to their characterisation. The action in Ezra 3 and 4 revolves around the conflict that arises between the returned exiles and their neighbours in Yehud. The Persian kings appear in the narrative to the extent that they are involved in this conflict. Once again, the narrator provides only the kings' own words—this time written in a letter—and narration of their actions, resulting in mainly indirect characterisation. The picture that emerges of them is consistent with that which emerged of Cyrus in Ezra 1.

Reference in Ezra 3 to the fact that the returned exiles were able to procure resources on account of Cyrus's edict reminds the implied reader of the significant role he played in the restoration process. On the other hand, the fact that so little actual progress takes place during his reign or in the time following, up until the reign of Darius, forces the implied reader to recognise that Cyrus was never actually a champion of the returned exiles' cause. The interpretation that his proclamation was issued more in the interests of political posturing than in the interests of actually reconstructing the temple grows in probability. Consequently, this creates a gap

between the significance of events for the narrator, which is the reconstruction of the temple, and their significance for Cyrus. Moreover, details included in the narrative that create parallels between Solomon and the returned exiles, as well as the speech of the returned exiles themselves, continue the apparent displacement of Cyrus from the standard monarchical roles, which was begun in Ezra 1. The way the returned exiles refer to Cyrus's instructions in their conversation with the surrounding peoples contributes to the perception that his instructions are being used in a way he did not intend. By a variety of means, then, the ironic representation of Cyrus is enhanced.

Artaxerxes appears in a proleptic scene in Ezra 4. The words of his letter, his decisions and the way he is addressed by others all construct a picture of him as having the interests of a typical ancient Near Eastern ruler, such as Cyrus also appeared to be in Ezra 1. In this case, the difference between the king's interests and the returned exiles' interests is much more obvious. Also, there is no mention of YHWH intervening to influence Artaxerxes' behaviour, and the king's action is unfavourable toward the returned exiles. This reinforces the perception that apart from instances of divine intervention, the Persian kings are unlikely to protect Judean interests. On the other hand, the narrator presents a letter that was written to Artaxerxes by certain officials opposing the Judeans that clearly exposes how the king was influenced by it in his decision. This is comparable to the earlier notice in the chapter that work on the temple was stopped during the reign of Cyrus because his counsellors were bribed. Both Cyrus and Artaxerxes, then, appear in the narrative to act more at the instigation of others, whether YHWH or their own counsellors, than independently. Yet both employ rhetoric that emphasises their own supreme authority in the matters they address. It appears that both YHWH and the kings' officials are able to use the conventional interests of the king to achieve their purposes. The kings thus continue to be shown as ironic characters.

Examination of the speech of the Judeans near the beginning of Ezra 4 and of the language employed by the officials in their letter to Artaxerxes reveals that both exhibit carefully chosen expression aimed at achieving specific rhetorical ends. This discovery confirms that such techniques were familiar to the implied reader and

increases the likelihood that the detection of rhetorically motivated expression on the part of the Persian kings is accurate.

The similarities between Cyrus and Artaxerxes already noted are enhanced by further features of the narrative. The use of the common epithet 'king of Persia' in connection with each prompts association between them and Darius as well. The structure of Ezra 4 and the reference to them as a group in the officials' letter all contribute to the perception that the Persian kings are understood to think similarly and be motivated by similar interests. The result is that 'Persian king' starts to take on the status of a single character or paradigm.

As before, the epithet 'king of Persia' serves to distinguish these kings from predecessors labelled 'king of Assyria'. At the same time, the exchange of letters between the officials and Artaxerxes makes clear that he sees himself as the successor of the Assyrians and Babylonians and even seeks to emulate their practices. In this way, the Persian kings continue to appear to be within the tradition of the Assyrians and Babylonians, even while distinguishable from them in some way. This corresponds to the ironic pattern already discussed in connection with the actions of the Persian kings, since the Assyrians and Babylonians appear in the narrative as those who brought about the hardship associated with exile, while the Persians have contributed to the restoration from exile.

Ezra 5

This chapter centres on an encounter, subsequent to the restart of building by the Judeans, between the Judeans and local government officials and the resulting letter from the officials to the king. The characterisation of the Persian kings is again mostly indirect, achieved through statements by the narrator and statements by the Judeans and officials in the letter addressed to Darius.

As previously, it emerges that YHWH's actions, rather than those of the Persian kings, play the greater role in guiding events. Similarly to Ezra 1, the motivation of the Judeans to work is traced back to YHWH and the words of his prophets, rather than the decrees of kings. In contrast to Ezra 4, the involvement of

officials does not stop the renewed work, and this is explicitly attributed to YHWH. The Persian kings thus appear subordinate to YHWH.

The way in which the Judeans have carefully phrased their speech, as recorded in the letter to Darius, indicates that they, too, assume that he operates on the basis of the values typical of ancient Near Eastern rulers. By framing their case so as to emphasise their compliance with Cyrus's original proclamation, they show that they expect Darius to be much more interested in the preservation of royal prerogative than in their religious tradition. Their account of the history of the matter leaves out significant features that were present in the narrator's account, amplifying the difference between the narrator's interests and those of Darius. The officials also appear by their words to assume that Darius has the same motivations as Cyrus had. Moreover, the fact that they are unaware of the existence of Cyrus's earlier instructions again implies that the proclamation recorded in Ezra 1 was made mainly for its rhetorical and symbolic value. This also tends to confirm the earlier reading of Ezra 1 in which Cyrus's proclamation was interpreted as primarily an assertion of his authority, only ironically serving to achieve YHWH's ends.

In addition, there is further evidence that Cyrus is seen as an unwitting agent in the narrative. The Judeans create a parallel between him and Nebuchadnezzar, who is portrayed elsewhere in the HB as an unwitting agent of YHWH, and they omit mention of the significant repatriation of exiles that resulted from Cyrus's proclamation and seemed unintended on his part. The narrator continues to portray the Judeans as taking over roles normally associated with ancient Near Eastern kings. All of this serves to further effect a picture of the Persian kings as assisting the restoration of the exiles inadvertently. They do not understand what the Judean characters and the narrator understand.

The use of epithets and the construction of parallels between Nebuchadnezzar and both Cyrus and Darius continues the phenomenon whereby the Persian kings are both associated with their Assyrian and Babylonian predecessors and at the same time distinguished from them.

Finally, the climate created by Persian rule appears less than comfortable for the returned exiles. The narratives of Ezra 4 and 5 make clear that they live in a

setting where their behaviour is critically scrutinised by foreigners who do not share their values. The speech of the Judeans with respect to the Persian king contrasts with two other examples of speech—their own speech with respect to their own former king, and the speech of the officials with respect to the Persian king. The result is that the Persian king does not appear to have the enthusiastic loyalty of the Judeans.

Ezra 6

The narrative continues with Darius's response to the letter from the officials, both in deed and in word. The narrator then tells of the completion of the temple and its immediate aftermath. Once again, characterisation of the Persian king is accomplished mostly indirectly, through presentation of his own words and the narration of his actions, but directly, through the use of epithets.

The account of events as given by the narrator draws attention to the activity of YHWH in influencing the behaviour of Darius, Cyrus and Artaxerxes. As previously, the most likely interpretation is seen to be that the Persian rulers are themselves unaware of YHWH's influence as they act to facilitate the restoration of the Judeans from exile.

At the same time, Darius is also described as acting according to the wishes of his officials. This furthers the ironic portrayal of the Persian kings, whose power and authority are obvious facts of life in the world of the narrative, but who only ever act in accordance with the wishes of some other.

The text of a memorandum of Cyrus's decree, discovered in the archives, is included in Darius's written reply. Comparison of this text with the proclamation of Ezra 1 confirms for the implied reader the earlier interpretation that Cyrus's behaviour was understandable by analogy with the acts of other ancient Near Eastern monarchs. His actions are paralleled by those of other rulers recorded in extra-biblical literature, and his motives appear to have been the same as theirs. In upholding Cyrus's decree, Darius also fits the ancient Near Eastern mould, and his actions and words, where these are independent of Cyrus's, also find parallels in

extra-biblical literature. The implied reader is able to understand the motivations of these kings on the basis of a rather well-established paradigm.

Once again, the narrator has crafted his account such that the implied reader recognises parallels between the events narrated and those of the exodus from Egypt. One result is that the Persian kings are naturally associated with the Egyptian Pharaoh.

Observation of the syntax employed by the narrator, augmented by contrast with a passage in 2 Chronicles, and recognition of a parallel constructed between the Judeans and the former king of Israel reveal that the Persian king continues to be displaced in the narrative from the standard monarchical roles. Although Cyrus and Darius are likely to have seen themselves fulfilling these very roles, the narrator does not endorse the standard Near Eastern ideology, promulgating instead the view that it is primarily the Judeans themselves who play the royal roles. The irony is heightened by the report of Darius's use of terminology which will have had one meaning for him but an additional meaning for the implied reader, similar to the technique used in Ezra 1.

The depiction of the Persian kings as virtually a single character also continues. The unusual grammar of Ezra 6:14 practically forces the implied reader to this conclusion. But it is also seen that the words of the kings themselves in their proclamations and letters lead in the same direction.

Finally, the connection between the Persians and their Assyrian and Babylonian predecessors continues to be enhanced. This is achieved by the narrator's use of epithets and by report of Cyrus's self-reference. The cumulative effect of the portrait of the Persians as typical ancient Near Eastern monarchs, as ironically achieving ends they do not directly intend, and as contributing to the restoration through specific actions only as a result of divine intervention, is to leave the strong impression that they did not ordinarily assist the Judeans.

Ezra 7

This chapter introduces the character Ezra. The reader meets him in connection with a letter from Artaxerxes making provision for the temple and

commissioning Ezra to ensure that the law of the god of heaven is observed in Yehud. As previously, the characterisation of the king arises primarily indirectly, from his own words presented in the letter. A significant contribution is also made by the words of Ezra, included immediately after the letter. In Ezra 8, Ezra becomes the narrator, and his references to the king, though brief, indirectly reveal something of how Ezra himself saw Artaxerxes.

In contrast to his earlier action in halting the reconstruction of Jerusalem's walls, Artaxerxes here appears as contributing significantly to the restoration of the Judean exiles by his generous provision for the temple and insistence that the law of the god of heaven be observed in Yehud. At the same time, the use of epithets, the contrast of terminology used by the king with that used by Ezra, and a comparison of the references to the actions of the king in this passage with references to the actions of kings in similar situations in extra-biblical literature reinforce the impression that Artaxerxes is an outsider from the Judean perspective. Both the narrator and Ezra the character are explicit in attributing Artaxerxes' supportive action to the intervening influence of YHWH. Moreover, in Ezra 8, Ezra describes a situation in which YHWH provided protection for the Judeans while the king explicitly did not. All of these features combine to convey the message that the good which has come to the Judeans through Artaxerxes is really the result of YHWH's action. Artaxerxes appears, as Cyrus and Darius before him, to be an agent influenced by YHWH on a particular occasion to provide significant assistance to the Judean restoration, rather than one predisposed to do so.

This understanding of matters is again supported by a number of features in the narrative which contribute to the perception of irony. Artaxerxes' instructions in the letter can be explained on the basis of standard ancient Near Eastern ideology without recourse to Yahwism. In particular, Artaxerxes' phraseology reveals that he is proceeding on the basis of the standard ideology. Yet the narrator and Ezra make clear that the actual effect of the king's action is to support the re-establishment of Yahwism in Yehud more than to achieve the purposes Artaxerxes likely intended. A contrast between the use of particular idioms by Artaxerxes and their use by the narrator and by Ezra, along with the reintroduction of parallels to the exodus from

Egypt enhance this view still further. In addition, the letter of Artaxerxes makes Ezra's subsequent action appear as obedience to the king, whereas Ezra's own speech reveals that he is primarily concerned with assisting the Judean restoration. An ironic interpretation is also consistent with the way in which the narrator's introduction of Ezra gives him prominence over the king in the narrative and with the continued depiction of the king as subject to the influence of others, in this case his counsellors and Ezra in particular. Artaxerxes also threatens punishment for disobedience, which turns out to function in the later narrative in a way he is unlikely to have intended.

The ironic role of Artaxerxes reinforces the earlier observed implication that the Persian kings are assumed in this narrative to be unlikely to assist the Judeans. This is further supported by noting the harshness of Artaxerxes which emerges when the punishments he enjoins are contrasted with those in the Torah, the absolute astonishment expressed by Ezra that the king would contribute to the Jerusalem temple as he does, and the surprising lack of protection afforded Ezra for his journey. The fact that Judeans continue to require permission to travel to Jerusalem reminds the implied reader that the situation is one of captivity, and the Persian king is the Judeans' captor.

The interconnections among the Persian kings also continue to multiply. The date formulas used by the narrator and the similarities between the provisions and threats contained in their letters contribute to the identification of Darius and Artaxerxes. The similarities between Cyrus's proclamation in Ezra 1 and Artaxerxes' letter in Ezra 7, as well as the fact that Artaxerxes' letter provides a logical next step to Cyrus's proclamation contribute to the identification of Cyrus and Artaxerxes. And the consistent theme of YHWH's influence on the inner beings of these kings strengthens the view that these kings function virtually as one in the narrative.

Ezra 9

The characterisation of the Persian kings in this chapter results from brief references to them by Ezra in his prayer. It is once again indirect. In some ways this passage functions as a summary of the narrative to this point. The opinions

expressed and implied in Ezra's prayer match those of the narrator elsewhere in the narrative. This also applies to the evident characterisation of the Persian kings.

The perspective Ezra gives of Persian rule is that it is related to the suffering the Judeans experience as a result of divine punishment. Ezra explicitly identifies their current subservience to the Persians as a wretched consequence of their past sin. He presents the specific blessings they have received at the hands of the Persians as a marked contrast from their usual experience under Persian rule. He implies that full restoration from exile would entail the end of Persian rule, and he takes for granted that his listeners share his perspective. Persian kings are not individuated; they are treated as a group. Thus, the Persian kings continue to function as a type or paradigm, and their characteristic association is with punishment on Israel for sin.

Ezra acknowledges that the Persian rulers have been a channel of blessing from YHWH, but states unequivocally that this is a result of YHWH's action. His brief account of history sustains continuity between the Assyrians and Babylonians and the Persians. His description of his present situation also uses terms and motifs reminiscent of the exodus from Egypt, once again invoking a parallel between the Persian rulers and Pharaoh. All of these features are familiar from earlier portions of the narrative. The effect is to reconfirm the perspective that the Persians are little different from their predecessors, but have been used in an unexpected way by YHWH on specific occasions to achieve progress toward the Judean restoration.

Finally, the earlier conclusion that the Persian kings' speeches are intended to be interpreted ironically is strengthened by the fact that Ezra's speech, by way of contrast, cannot be interpreted in such a way.

Nehemiah 2

The narrative of Nehemiah 1-2 introduces the character Nehemiah and sets the stage for his activities in the following chapters. Nehemiah himself narrates this passage, in which he tells of his concern to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, his prayer to YHWH that this might be achieved, his encounter with Artaxerxes in which he requests permission to rebuild the walls, and his initial activities upon arrival in Jerusalem. The characterisation of the king is indirect and occurs primarily in a brief

reference to him at the end of the prayer, the reported conversation between Nehemiah and Artaxerxes, and other brief references to him in the ensuing narrative and Nehemiah's conversations with the Judeans and their enemies.

From beginning to end this episode creates the impression that Artaxerxes is unconcerned about the welfare of the Judeans. Nehemiah's requests to YHWH all imply that he expects Artaxerxes to be unconcerned and uninterested in helping unless YHWH intervenes. The inclusion of Nehemiah's prayer before the account of his encounter with Artaxerxes encourages the implied reader to see the king's response as an answer to Nehemiah's prayer. The wording of the prayer itself recalls other passages in the HB about Israelites standing before their captors, who would also ordinarily be uninterested in their welfare. In the encounter with Artaxerxes, Nehemiah takes great care in his speech to avoid arousing suspicion. He does not present his concerns to Artaxerxes in the same terms as he expressed them to God, or in which the implied reader understands them, but instead frames them in terms appealing to the interests common to Persian rulers. Artaxerxes, for his part, expresses initial suspicion toward Nehemiah and at no point in the exchange appears friendly. His decision to grant Nehemiah's request appears in some way to be influenced by the presence of the queen. Later in the narrative, although Nehemiah experiences a number of difficulties, his lack of further request to the king for help is consistent with a lack of expectation that such would be granted. A brief mention of the king in Nehemiah 5 places responsibility on him for the hardship experienced due to the burden of heavy taxation. The military assistance the king did grant initially to Nehemiah is of no effect and not even mentioned when it is most needed.

In this presentation, Artaxerxes thus appears as a typical ancient Near Eastern monarch. Although no explicit statement is given by the narrator or Artaxerxes the character about his motivations, his actions are understandable by analogy with those of others recorded in extra-biblical literature. The terminology he uses in contrast to that of Nehemiah and the expectations evident in the speech of the Judeans' enemies near the end of Nehemiah 2 support this understanding. Moreover, the difference between Nehemiah's public and private speech about the king as well as his reticence in proclaiming loyalty to him when it is called into question indicate that the

prevailing attitude of Judeans (and by implication, the narrator) toward their Persian overlords was less than sanguine. For good measure, Nehemiah in his prayer draws a parallel between himself and the Israelites of the exodus from Egypt, once again inviting the implied reader to see the Persian king in terms of the Pharaoh.

This contributes, of course, to the now-familiar perception of irony in the king's actions. The structure of the episode and Nehemiah's explicit comment on it indicate that the king has acted as he has because of YHWH's influence. He has significantly aided the Judean restoration, although that is unlikely to have been his intention. An implication of Nehemiah's prayer that takes this theme even further is that foreign rulers are unable to prevent Judean independence, which is seen by Nehemiah as a feature of the restoration. Of course, Artaxerxes is completely unaware of Nehemiah's private prayers and, therefore, of YHWH's influence. As in previous parts of the narrative, the king responds to the influence of one of his officials, and both Nehemiah and the enemies of the Judeans reveal by their speech that they believe it is possible to manipulate the king. The initiative taken by Nehemiah and the use of Davidic phraseology by Nehemiah and the Judeans further displace Artaxerxes from the characteristic roles of ancient Near Eastern kings.

The similarities between the picture of Artaxerxes in this episode and those of other Persian kings previously, together with the preference for the designation 'the king' reinforces the impression that they together function as a single character or paradigm in the narrative.

Nehemiah 9

The characterisation of the Persian kings in this section arises from references to non-Israelite kings in general as well as more specific references to kings of particular ethnicities who are associated by parallels with the Persians, and from specific references to the Persians themselves. All occur within a prayer which the MT attributes to the Levites as a group.

The structure of the prayer, combined with specific word choices and intertextual allusions, forges a parallel between the Pharaoh of the exodus and the Persian kings. The prayer also repeatedly asserts that domination by any foreign

power is undesirable. The roles attributed to the Assyrians and the present Persians, as well as an intertextual allusion, portray Persian rule as an extension of the Assyrian. Along similar lines, the discussion of God's justice, the depiction of Persian rule as a reversal of God's good intentions for Israel and the explicit emphatic statement that Persian rule causes the Judeans to be in great need present the Persian kings as instruments of divine punishment. Further factors involve the effective use of a particular Hebrew root to implicate the Persians as enemies of Israel and the rhetorical equation of desiring to serve the Persians with desiring to sin. These factors together confirm the view of most commentators that this passage contains the clearest example of anti-Persian sentiment in EN.

Retrospectively, this passage sheds light on the statements of Persian rulers earlier in the book. The claim implicit in Cyrus's proclamation in Ezra 1 contrasts sharply with the outlook of Nehemiah 9, with the latter passage closer to the view of the narrator than the aforementioned proclamation. It is also possible at this stage to perceive the contrast between the kings' purposes in re-establishing the Jerusalem cult with its corresponding law and the Judeans' hope that these very institutions would lead to independence from Persia. The perception of such irony is further enhanced by the awareness of the complete lack of royal theology in EN, the Persian kings' lack of involvement in activities appearing throughout the book that are normally considered royal and the provision of food for the temple personnel by the Israelites themselves in Nehemiah 12. All of these contribute to the theme of the displacement of the Persian rulers from royal roles characteristic of ancient Near Eastern kings. Together these features assure that the implied reader understands the Persian kings as ironic characters.

Brief references to Persian kings in Nehemiah 10-13 emphasise their association with their Assyrian and Babylonian predecessors by the use of epithet, show them acting like typical ancient Near Eastern kings, highlight the lack of freedom the Judeans have under the Persians and describe the Judeans' ongoing experience of Persian rule as hardship.

Summary of Prominent Themes

A careful study of the characterisation of the Persian kings in EN reveals that it is not the purpose of the implied author to make a statement about the Persian kings themselves. Rather, these kings appear as characters in the narrative in order to make a statement about YHWH. Apart from those places where they are mentioned briefly, they appear in episodes, usually near the beginning (Karrer 2001: 103), to give official political sanction to specific activities and provide material resources. Although, from the perspective of an ancient reader familiar with the behaviour of Near Eastern kings and its significance, they seem concerned to assert their authority and consolidate their empire, in the narrative YHWH uses their actions to achieve his purposes. The concrete objectives that the Persian kings pursue coincide with the concrete objectives of YHWH. But the narrative does not depict these events as having the political significance the Persian kings intended. Instead, the narrative consistently finds the significance of events in their contribution to the restoration of the Judeans to the faithful service of their God (Gunn and Fewell 1993: 137). For example, in connection with the commission Artaxerxes gives to Ezra in Ezra 7, Berquist writes that 'Artaxerxes I worked for greater social cohesion in Yehud and for increased loyalty to and usefulness for the Persian Empire' (1995: 113). This is probably true of Artaxerxes historically, and is likely the motivation the implied reader of EN would ascribe to Artaxerxes the character. Within the narrative of EN, however, there is no indication of increased loyalty to or usefulness for Persia in Yehud as a result of Artaxerxes' action. And any increase in social cohesion among the Judeans is presented as resulting from their concern to worship and obey YHWH scrupulously. In fact, insofar as the Judeans' commitment to be faithful to YHWH distinguishes them from the surrounding peoples, the overall effect within Yehud is a decrease in social cohesion. In this way, then, YHWH is shown to be able to achieve his purposes, and even the most powerful rulers in the world, far from being able to resist his will, are actually drafted into his service. The main function of the Persian kings as characters in EN is to illustrate this concept.

Nevertheless, this is not all that may be said. A rudimentary picture of the Persian kings does emerge, consisting of several foundational characteristics. The

first of these is that the Persian kings in EN tend to *merge together into a single character, or a single role played by virtually indistinguishable characters*. In the first instance, this is because they act similarly. Both Cyrus and Artaxerxes grant permission for exiled Judeans to travel to Jerusalem, and Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes all commission significant construction projects there and make provision for the material resources needed. Further, however, they are characterised as a group by both the implied author and characters within the narrative. The implied author uses the epithet 'king of Persia' with each of these kings, and in Ezra 6:14 uses it in the singular with all three of them together. In that verse, as well, the narrator refers to the command of these three kings in the singular, as if their several commands were essentially one and the same. In Ezra 9 Ezra provides a similar 'group picture', referring to the 'kings of Persia' such that the implied reader recognises that each has played the same role in the episode in which he has appeared. The prayer of Nehemiah 9, ostensibly recited by the Levites, represents the Persian kings as acting in a uniform fashion with respect to the hardship they have caused for the Judeans. Finally, none of them is shown in EN in a way that would suggest the possession of any traits that would ultimately distinguish him from the typical paradigm of a non-Judean ancient Near Eastern ruler. The motivations and characteristics generally assumed of such kings seem to apply equally to the Persian kings in EN. These various factors serve to create the impression that 'the Persian king' is a role within the story that is filled successively, *without* distinction, by Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes. Their personal names and chronology are the only appreciable differences among them.

The use of epithets is an important factor in the identification of a second characteristic. The Persian kings are at one and the same time *both similar to and different from the Assyrians and Babylonians*. Although they are referred to by the title 'king of Persia', they are at times called 'king of Assyria' and 'king of Babylon' as well. The narrative makes it clear that they see themselves as the successors to these earlier rulers, and that others see them in this way as well. This has important implications for the understanding of the narrative. In the first place, the implication is that the Persian kings are non-Judeans. The Judeans continue to be held in

subjection, and experience this as suffering and understand it as punishment for sin. This is not so much argued in the narrative as everywhere assumed, although it is explicitly stated on occasion.⁹⁹ The implication is that full restoration from the judgment of sin will result in freedom from the Persians. In this respect, the Persians are like their predecessors. On the other hand, the Persian kings are used by YHWH to bring blessing to the Judeans in the midst of judgment, whereas the Assyrians and Babylonians were not. Their role in initiating the restoration of the Judeans sets them apart.

A third characteristic is closely connected to narrative reticence. When the reader is supplied with the actions of the Persian kings, their motives are seldom stated. Where some motivation is stated, it conforms to that which would arise from a typical ancient Near Eastern polytheistic outlook. As already mentioned, the Persian kings have no characteristics that make them different from other rulers of the time. Therefore, since there is confirming evidence in favour of it and no disconfirming evidence against it, the implied reader attributes to the Persian kings *the general characteristics that would have been assumed of any non-Judean ruler of the period*. The gaps presented by the lack of information about the kings' motivations are thus filled by assuming the same kinds of motivations that kings would ordinarily have had for carrying out such actions. There is no reason for the reader to suppose that the Persian kings are somehow unique in their motivations. This is especially so because the actions themselves are not unique, but have many parallels with those of other ancient Near Eastern rulers. In terms of human intention, then, the Persian kings' actions may be understood in a relatively ordinary way.

Throughout the narrative, however, their actions are seen as remarkable evidence of YHWH's influence. Karrer has expressed a view that is not far removed from that propounded in this study. She writes that Ezra 1 and 3-6 give the Israelite view of a specific series of events based on a widely practised Persian policy (Karrer

⁹⁹ It is important to remember that covert characterisation transmits the implied author's values no less clearly than overt, see above, p. 47.

2001: 335). She thinks the account has been shaped in a particular way that may obscure the actual situation, giving a different perspective than would have been held by contemporary observers. In response to Karrer, however, it is also possible that the widely practised Persian policy was widely known and familiar to both author and readers. In this case, the shaping of the account indeed gives a different perspective from that which would have been held by most observers. They would have thought that Cyrus and the other kings were exercising their sovereignty over Judah in typical fashion. The implied author, however, wants the reader to see that although this is obviously what the kings were attempting to do, YHWH was using their ambitions to accomplish his purposes. The main difference between Karrer's view and that proposed in this study is that this study takes seriously the possibility that the narrator and implied reader were aware of the same historical-cultural background elements that modern scholars are aware of. A sensitive reading of the text need not assume naiveté on the part of the implied reader. If the implied reader is aware of Persian practices, as is likely, he will correctly perceive the irony portrayed between the kings' intentions and YHWH's purposes.

It is important to understand why the line of argument presented in this study is not inconsistent: that is, in what sense the actions of the kings can be extraordinary (and thus the work of YHWH) and yet understood in a 'typical' way (with the Persian kings doing what other monarchs did). The crucial factor is that although these sorts of actions were not uncommon, neither were they everyday events. In particular, it was usually the 'more important' places and peoples such as Babylon and Egypt that received the kind of treatment given to the Judeans in EN. The kings' actions were not unprecedented and were motivated by what the narrator would consider ill-informed polytheistic beliefs. In this sense they were typical. The fact that they benefited the Judeans and contributed to a restoration of Yahwism made them extraordinary in the eyes of the narrator and confirmed that the hand of YHWH was behind them. The interpretation of EN developed in this study accords well with the historical observation of Grabbe:

It is often stated that 'it was Persian policy to support religion'. One can respond with both a 'yes' and a 'no'. On the affirmative side, the Persians continued what was already general policy in the Near Eastern empires: to tolerate local cults as

long as they did not threaten insubordination. They also granted special favors (not necessarily permanent) to certain specific cults for political reasons. On the negative side, the alleged support of cults is often exaggerated in modern literature because of the propaganda of the Persian kings themselves. Overall Persian policy was rather to reduce the income of temples. Little evidence exists that cults generally received state support (as sometimes alleged), which is hardly surprising since temples usually had their own incomes. On the contrary, temples were regulated and taxed, both in goods and services (1994: 290-91).

The overall structure of the narrative as well as the comments of implied author and characters generate a fourth characteristic. Within EN four instances are recounted in which the Persian kings supply important assistance to the Judean restoration. Each instance is marked, either by narrative discourse or the comment of reliable characters, as unusual and the result of YHWH's direct influence. This implies that the Persian kings are only helpful to the Judeans when YHWH intervenes. This does not inspire a Judean reader to have confidence in the Persian kings, since the text shows that such intervention does not always occur and the implied reader would be aware from his own experience that in fact it occurs very seldom. In other words, the Persian kings emerge as *generally unhelpful to the Judeans*. From a literary standpoint, this is consistent with the observation of van Wijk-Bos on the background presupposed by EN:

It was not so much the particular character of a given ruler as the general character of the reality that mattered. The reality of the period for Judah was dependence on Persia, being overseen by outsiders, and being heavily taxed, a condition that, apart from being a hardship in itself, also lent itself easily to internal corruption (1998: 5).

It is also possible to adjust the statement of Duggan with respect to what he perceives to be a development within EN: 'an adversarial attitude toward the Persian overlords replaces an appreciation of them as agents of providence' (2001: 229). Instead, it may be said that both aspects are assumed throughout the narrative. The adversarial attitude is the presumed background, made explicit at points. Their function as agents of providence is consistently understood against this background as striking evidence of divine favour toward the Judeans. From a historical standpoint, this characteristic is also consistent with studies that have found no evidence of special

benevolence toward Judaism as part of Persian imperial policy (Dandamaev and Lukonin 1989: 249).

A fifth characteristic is that the Persian kings are *diminished with respect to their authority*. This effect is achieved by the narrative in two ways. First, the Persian kings are portrayed as subject to the influence of others. Although it is clear that as lords of the Persian Empire they are the most powerful individuals in the narrative world, practically every decision made by a Persian king in EN appears to be the result of influence by YHWH, the enemies of the Judeans, or the Judeans themselves. Second, throughout the narrative, the Persian kings are regularly displaced from standard ancient Near Eastern royal roles by the Judeans themselves. The contributions of the kings to the restoration, viz. 'building the temple', providing funding, and promulgating the law, are ultimately taken over in each case by the Judeans themselves. This minimises, rather than augments, the perception of them as legitimate and authoritative rulers over the Judeans. It also diminishes the view that Cyrus in particular, or the Persian kings in general, function as a 'new Solomon' or 'David'. This characteristic may be illustrated by the development evident within the narrative with respect to the question of initiative. At the beginning of EN, YHWH stirs Cyrus to make a decree, to which the exiles respond. In Ezra 5 YHWH's prophets stir Zerubbabel and Joshua directly, and the king is only consulted after the work is (re)began. In Ezra 7 Ezra receives everything he *asks* from the king, which is detailed in a lengthy letter from the king. Finally, in Nehemiah 2 Nehemiah *details* his request to the king, to which the king agrees. The king's initiating role is progressively diminished throughout the narrative.

There is a final theme that should be mentioned. Rather than a characteristic like the others mentioned above, it contributes to several of them. It is the recurrence of the second exodus theme, which repeatedly casts the Persian kings as *parallel to the Pharaoh of Egypt*. Insofar as the Judeans correspond to the Israelites who left Egypt in the first exodus, the Persian king corresponds to Pharaoh. The Persian kings and Pharaoh may be compared with respect to a number of details, but perhaps the most significant are that they are portrayed as subject to YHWH's will as he achieves his purposes for the Judeans, and that they are understood as captors of the

Judeans. The parallels have a significant effect on the interpretation of EN as a whole. The Pharaoh chose to let the Israelites go, but then desired to re-enslave them. The Persian kings have 'let the exiles go' (return to Jerusalem), but have never released them from slavery. Thus, although the exiles have rebuilt a temple and a city, are living in their own land, and have made great strides toward implementing the Torah, they are not fully 'restored'.

Wider Implications

The observations of this study clearly have important implications for the interpretation of EN. But they also have implications for a number of other issues, including the relationship of the parts of the book to each other, the relationship of EN to the prophetic literature and the view of the Persian administration reflected in EN.

Relationship of the Parts of EN

Bedford has reached a conclusion about Ezra 1-6 similar to that of many others: 'This narrative [Ezra 1-6] displays a pro-Persian proclivity whereby the Achaemenid Persian administration is accepted as the divinely appointed administrators of the territory of Judah rather than as a temporary rule which Yahweh will transcend, as Deutero-Isaiah avers' (2001: 83). Two points should be made with respect to this popular view. In the first place, it exhibits the tendency to read Ezra 1-6 rather in isolation from the rest of EN. If one reads Ezra 1-6 in connection with Ezra 9 and, especially, Nehemiah 9, it is hard to maintain the view that the writer of the book is pro-Persian. Yet there is no textual evidence that Ezra 1-6 ever existed except as part of a larger narrative, either as part of 1 Esdras or as part of EN. It must be asked whether a reading of Ezra 1-6 in isolation can properly yield a correct understanding of the implied author's intention. This question becomes only more relevant when consideration is given to the arguments of a number of scholars that Ezra 1-6 was originally written as an introduction to EN, a work formed from a nucleus consisting of the pre-existing Ezra 7-10 and Nehemiah (Williamson 1983: 1-30). Second, the present study indicates that there is good reason to doubt whether

there is a pro-Persian proclivity in Ezra 1-6, even if it *is* read by itself. The Persian rulers are 'accepted' as divinely appointed administrators of Judah in the sense that they are the successors of the Assyrians and Babylonians, divinely appointed to punish the Israelites for their sin. They are accepted in the sense one might use the word in saying 'I accept that I cannot run as fast as I used to'. Their actions in support of the restoration of Judah are seen as the result of divine intervention. The kings are not portrayed as supporting Judah apart from this divine intervention, nor is their change of heart depicted as resulting in any support for Judah beyond the specific reinstitution of temple worship in Jerusalem. A third observation may also be made, specifically in relation to Bedford's quote. Within Ezra 1-6 it seems that YHWH to some extent does transcend Persian rule. Just as, in prospect, Isaiah 40-55 emphasises the sovereignty of YHWH in all the prophesied events involving Cyrus, so Ezra 1-6 allows the reader to see this sovereignty in action in the activities of Cyrus and Darius in retrospect. The Persians themselves are essentially foreign rulers very much like others encountered in HB literature ('the king of Assyria'). Even within Ezra 1-6 alone, it may be seen that the widespread view that EN is a pro-Persian work abandoning the prophetic perspective is suspect.

Of course, this impinges upon the question of whether Nehemiah 9 was added to EN by a writer who held a different view from that reflected in the rest of the work. Once it is clear that even so 'pro-Persian' a section as Ezra 1-6 is in reality not so pro-Persian after all, there seems to be little ground for attributing an 'anti-Persian' portion such as Nehemiah 9 to a different hand. It must be remembered that the book is written so as to give the impression of incorporating a number of documents, each of which was ostensibly authored originally by someone other than the final author of EN. If this is indeed the case, then the various parts of EN were written by different hands. But the real question is whether EN in its extant form has been structured so as to produce a unified composition. With respect to the portrayal of the Persian kings, this study suggests that there is adequate evidence of unity, and there is no need to posit a compositional process that resulted in disharmony among the parts. Rather, it appears that the final composer has achieved coherence, through selection, arrangement and perhaps paraphrase.

Relationship to Prophetic Literature

It has commonly been held that EN represents a perspective on expectations for the Judean community quite different from that of prophetic literature such as Haggai, Zechariah and Isaiah. Whereas the latter books seem to look forward to a greater restoration than had been experienced thus far, it is often felt that EN sees the restoration as complete. The argument often includes the premise that Nehemiah 9 and, to some extent, Ezra 9 are out of step with the rest of EN. By showing how these two chapters may be understood as representative of the prevailing view in EN rather than contrary to it, however, it becomes possible to see that the outlook of EN may be much more similar to that of the prophets than many scholars have accepted. Of course, there can be no triumphalism in EN because, whereas a prophetic text uses celebratory language in anticipation of future events, a historiographical narrative must restrict itself to the past. The history covered in the narrative allows only a limited celebration of YHWH's goodness, since the writer believes that only a little has been experienced and much more is to come (McConville 1986: 205-24; Williamson 1985: I-ii). EN may share with Haggai and Zechariah, then, a view of the contemporary situation as one of limited restoration, with a better future still ahead, contingent on the obedience to YHWH of the returned exiles. Such an understanding may properly be set beside and, indeed, may strengthen the observations of Laato:

I have concluded that the issue of the forgiveness of sins was an acute problem at the beginning of the Persian period (it continued to be a matter of importance during later periods) and it was closely connected with the hope that YHWH would restore the independence of Israel. When YHWH grants the people political independence, i.e. during the messianic era, then the sins of the people will be completely blotted out (see e.g. Zech 3:8-10). In other words when YHWH restores the people to their previous glory his mercy towards the people will be evident. Even though the beginning of the Persian period was interpreted in the prayers of Ezra 9 and Neh 9 as a positive turning-point brought about by YHWH (so also in Isa 40-55), a yearning for total independence is echoed in these prayers, indicating that YHWH has not yet shown his full measure of his mercy to his people (1992: 105).

It was noted in the discussion of Nehemiah 9 that there is considerable irony in the Persian kings' support for the reinstitution of the temple cult and observance of the law of Moses, insofar as these are ultimately seen by the community (and implied author) as stepping stones to ultimate independence from Persia as part of a complete restoration under YHWH. This matches very well with Bedford's observations concerning Isaiah:

Implicit in the rule of Yahweh from Zion [in Isaiah] is the overthrow of all temporal powers, including the Persian empire. The acceptance of Cyrus is in order to finally transcend his authority and bring in a new age of the rule of Yahweh . . . The conclusion to be drawn is that the present political order is sanctioned by Yahweh, but only for a time. It is a means to a greater end—the revelation and recognition of the sovereignty of Yahweh (2001: 77).

Thus, it may be seen that EN does not necessarily reflect a view far removed from that evident in the prophetic literature.

View of Persian Rule Reflected in the Narrative

It was mentioned in the introduction to this study that, for many years, scholars have attempted to use EN in order to uncover information about the past. It is possible that a literary reading of the text may offer useful insight for historical study. As Long has pointed out,

careful literary reading is a prerequisite of responsible historical reconstruction. That is to say, a conscientious, fair-minded attempt to understand a biblical text on its own terms is logically prior to any historicizing about it. Therefore, the more skilled biblical interpreters become in reading texts *literarily*, the more competent they will become in assessing them *historically* (1994: 159-60).

It may be asked whether the portrayal of the Persian kings in EN allows the modern reader to draw any conclusions about the attitude it reflects toward Persian rule. In other words, if EN is used as a window into the past, representing the thoughts of at least one individual living in ancient times, consideration may be given to the question of what those thoughts are with respect to Persian rule.

It is very hard to sustain the heretofore widespread opinion that EN reflects a pro-Persian attitude. The kings themselves are not portrayed enthusiastically or positively. On each of the four occasions where they appear in the narrative providing support for the Judean restoration, this activity is invariably qualified by the narrator or a reliable character as evidence of YHWH's gracious influence on behalf of the Judeans. It is important to observe the distinction between saying that the Persian kings are an expression of YHWH's favour and saying that YHWH's actions upon the Persian kings are an expression of his favour. It is the latter of these two that is in view in EN. The clear implication is that, were it not for YHWH's influence on those occasions, such assistance would not have been forthcoming. All of the assistance the Judeans receive from the Persian monarchs in EN is traceable to those four moments in time that the narrative celebrates as astonishing. Where the Persian monarchs appear in the narrative acting apart from YHWH's influence, their activity is uniformly experienced by the Judeans as bitter suffering. Thus, the view of Persian rule reflected in EN appears to be largely negative.

Without evaluating the data of EN for historical reliability, it is difficult to assess its value for historical reconstruction more broadly. It is hard to know how widely the view of Persian rule reflected in EN was shared, even if it is largely in accord with the outlook found in the HB prophetic books. But it may at least be said that EN should not be used as evidence of a pro-Persian attitude existing among post-exilic Jews. It may perhaps be argued that if the narrative provides even somewhat reliable information about historical events in the early post-exilic period, and if the Persians did in fact provide some sponsorship for the Judean restoration, then it is likely that there would have been a substantial number of Judeans who had a pro-Persian attitude. In other words, the propaganda of the Persian kings would likely have been effective on at least some people. However, this is conjectural and provides no basis for supposing how widespread such an attitude may have been. In any case, this is a very different argument from saying that the implied author of EN, and therefore some actual historical author or editor, was pro-Persian. Arguments for the existence of such views must therefore be established on grounds independent of EN.

In light of the interplay of perspectives evident throughout EN, it seems appropriate in closing to consider the different understandings of the sway of the Persian sceptre generated by the findings of this study.

1. The Persian kings are portrayed as ruling over the Judeans in the period covered by the events of EN. The Persian sceptre held sway over the Judeans.
2. The Persian kings are portrayed at times (four, to be exact) as acting to support the Judean restoration, and at others as constituting an obstacle to it. In this sense, the Persian sceptre swayed back and forth, now favouring the Judeans, now opposing them.
3. The Persian kings are portrayed as regularly subject to the influence of others, whether YHWH or government officials. Within EN YHWH influences them in order to aid the Judean restoration, whereas court officials tend to influence them to hinder it. The Persian sceptre is thus easily swayed.
4. The Persian kings are portrayed as presenting themselves to their Judean subjects as benefactors. Their purpose in these presentations is to inspire a positive attitude toward them on the Judeans' part. Many modern scholars have read the statements of Persian kings contained in EN and assumed that, although the scholars themselves recognise these statements as propagandistic, the implied author of EN did not. They conclude that the implied author of EN, rather like the Babylonian cultic personnel responsible for the Cyrus Cylinder, in fact thought of the Persian kings as benefactors and represented a pro-Persian outlook current in Yehud at some point in the post-exilic period. The Persian sceptre has thus exercised considerable sway over modern scholars.

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